

The Return to Red Mountain

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The Return to Red Mountain

by [Babble](#)

Summary

On Vvardenfell, fire and ash have rained for decades without witness. But mortal footsteps at last break the silence cast by the Red Year. Daedric cultists land with malevolent intent, awaiting the arrival of a doomed being of legend. On Solstheim, Knight-Paladin Gelebor finds his faith in Auriel and will to live challenged until an encounter with an odd woman brings him new hope. But Nadene Othryn has many secrets, and little care for the troubles of Morrowind. The pair battle monsters and fate itself on their journey towards an isle forsaken by elves and gods alike.

Godless

Chapter Notes

This story will be fandom-blind friendly to those unfamiliar with the story and lore of Morrowind, as although I've played the game I know Skyrim far better. Although existing in the same continuity as "The Death of the Dragonborn", this tale is not a sequel and reading TDOTD is not required.

"Count only the happy hours." - Vivec

For centuries before the eruption, the island had been a haven for the wicked and rejected of Tamriel. So when the cannibal priestess Eola took her first steps out of the rowboat, warm ash shifting beneath her feet and blasted air burning her lungs, she felt in good company. The volcano loomed above, swallowing the horizon, spewing poison into the sky. The sight was horrible and wonderful. *This is where our true work will begin.*

"Not so sure about this place," Banning muttered. Next to him, the others were still trying to get their bearings. Hogni Red-Arm coughed heavily, nearly collapsing, and all of them had tears running down their face from the ashfall. The potions she'd made them consume only went so far. Lisbet, ever faithful, kept her chin high.

"Fear not, my coven," Eola said with a smile. "Lady Namira has led us here for a reason." The only way they'd made landfall through the boiling seas and endless craggy rocks poking out of the sea was from the wise guidance of the Daedra they served. They were the first to step foot here, where the greatest devastation had been wrought. On the other side of the island the small town of Balmora had been rebuilt, but like the small outposts of Telvanni scattered across the eastern shore they were irrelevant to her plans. *For now.*

Hogni cursed, wiping his eyes. "Ya know I'll follow you to the ends of Nirn, Eola. But Markarth was a good place for us. We had a steady source of meals, and gold to fund our little feasts. No one's lived in this ruin for a hundred years. We ain't gray skins. How are we supposed to pay tribute while chewing on old jerky, hm?"

"Our lady has blessed me with another vision." She turned her head so the others could see her empty eyesocket, the original cause of their diaspora. Removing the organ had been painful, yes, but it wasn't as if the blind eye had been doing her any good. *And with some salt and herbs, it made a delightful breakfast.* "Someday soon, elves will return to this doomed island. Among them will walk the rarest meat in Tamriel, an individual the Lady of Decay has long been watching. She has promised me once this powerful soul lays on our feasting table, we will ascend to new heights of enlightenment."

The others looked entranced at her words. *I knew they'd come around, once I shared my knowledge.*

"What'll we do till then?" Banning tried to hide his glances back at the vessel floating in the murky waters. She grinned knowingly. *You don't have to repress your hunger, my brother. Not any longer.*

Eola gestured. "You and Hogni return to the ship. Begin to unload our cargo."

On the road out of Markarth, they'd encountered a Khajiit caravan in the night. The cats hadn't had time to rise from their bedrolls before her coven sent them beyond with teeth and blade. After that, it had just been a matter of loading up the meat and casting a few preservation spells. *We'll eat well for some time.*

"And me, Eola?" Lisbet looked eager for instruction. Although the young shopkeeper was the newest member of their coven, she was also the most loyal. Eola had grown quite fond of her.

"You will come with me, sister. Nearby is a cave that will shelter us from the poisons of this land. It is there we'll wait, and build our preparations."

Later on, as the sun set on Vvardenfell, the Cult of Namira held a feast for the first time in the dim light of day.

"No, serjo. We don't carry any creams or ointments. I'm not sure any shop in Raven Rock does."

"That's fine," Gelebor replied. "Thank you for checking."

"I'd think an Altmer would travel with his own supply." The Dunmer merchant raised his eyebrows. "Especially one as pale as you."

"Wise words," Gelebor said with a strained smile. "I've exhausted my reserves sooner than expected. Ash appears to fall from the sky every day here."

As if to mock him, the clouds above the town began to darken, and thunder rumbled on the horizon.

"That's the way o' life on Solstheim." The merchant glanced up at the sky, and began to shutter his stall. "You ought to book a ship to Skyrim, friend. If the ash bothers you, you've come to the wrong island."

Gelebor opened his mouth to reply, but the merchant had abruptly closed his shutters as the first wisps of gray began to fall. He sighed, looking around the suddenly abandoned marketplace as the other shopkeepers followed suit. After two months in Raven Rock, the ash storms still seemed to sneak up on him. *Perhaps one day I'll develop the sixth sense these natives have.* He wasn't sure if the idea of eventually adapting to this wasteland brought him more hope or sorrow.

Auriel preserve me. Gelebor pulled his hood up and walked swiftly down the street, trying to shield his face from the unrelenting ashfall. Only the swinging paper lanterns on the sides of the road signaled he was heading the right direction. After all this time, the clay dwellings of the Dunmer still looked the same when covered in the gray dust. He only knew the Retching Netch by the Redoran guard posted outside. Gelebor wasn't sure if it was the same guard every day, or if they switched out every now and then.

"Good evening," he greeted the bonemold-clad elf. As always, the guard made no reply. That was the way of these Dunmer: rough, unyielding, but sincere. In a way, they reminded Gelebor of what the sterner members of his own people had been like.

Gelebor entered the inn, taking a deep breath of the relatively clean air. The Retching Netch was always the most busy when the ash storms raged, and this evening was no exception. Pleasant music filled the tavern, along with the spicy fragrance of sujamma. Several of the Dunmer gave him unfriendly glances as he went down the stairs to the lower level, shaking the ash from his

cloak. Slitter and Mogrul were among those on the upper floor. He pointedly avoided eye contact with them.

"And so returns our local priest of Akatosh," Geldis Sadri greeted him with a smile. Gelebor didn't yet know Dunmer faces well enough to ascertain whether the expression was genuine. "Just in time to pay his rent."

Some of the elves seated at the bar left, perhaps sensing the awkward situation. Most of the patrons of the Retching Netch went about their business, as was the way of their kind, but a few newcomers who had never seen him gawked curiously from their tables.

"Geldis, my friend," Gelebor began, trying to force a smile of his own. "I'm afraid work has been a bit scarce recently."

"We've been here before," Geldis chided. "You know I can't give anyone special treatment, mate. I'm a fair elf, but enough is enough. You've already had three days extra to pay what's due."

"You're right, of course." Despite himself, Gelebor felt humiliated standing in the inn with scarcely a coin to his name. *Never before I have yearned so fiercely for the white halls of the Chantry.* "You'll have your payment by sunset tomorrow, Geldis. I swear this by the grace of Auriel."

Geldis sighed. "Akatosh, Auriel, whatever you want to call him, doesn't have to maintain this place and keep the sujamma flowing. I'm sorry. I'll have my gold by morning, or you're out on the street."

Gelebor's head fell, his hood shifting forward. "Very well."

He left the bar quietly, feeling stares on his back. The room he rented was a small one, tucked away from sight at the far corner of the building. Geldis had been using it as a storage closet before. Gelebor liked the space well enough. In the Forgotten Vale, he'd had no space of his own at all; only his armor, mace, and the light of Auriel shining down on him. The ground had been his bed, and the stars his ceiling. Strange that he yearned for those days.

As was the case with many places on Solstheim, his room was far too hot. Gelebor slipped off his cloak as soon as the door was securely shut, throwing the garment on a hook next to the door. Besides for the hook, the only furnishings in the room were a small bed and a chair. Gelebor sat down, as he had many times before, and began murmuring his mantras to Auriel. Normally, he didn't begin this ritual until later in the day. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Gelebor's pale eyes were drawn to the space under the bed, where his only items of value were securely hidden. First was the ivory armor set he'd received upon swearing his life in service to Auriel. Thousands of years had passed since his vow, but Gelebor still recalled fondly the feeling of pride as the other knight-paladins welcomed him into their ranks. *How I miss my brothers and sisters in arms.* The armor was invaluable, irreplaceable, and undeniably dangerous to wear in public.

If even one scholar knowledgeable of the Falmer caught sight of the ancient engravings and telltale workmanship of the set, Gelebor would surely be exposed as the last living member of his race. Not even he was naive enough to believe there weren't those in Tamriel who would take that news as a challenge.

What was hidden next to his armor was perhaps less practically useful, but the artifact was nonetheless one of the few remaining connections he had to his past. *The initiate's ewer.* For centuries, Gelebor had handed the receptacle over with good wishes to adventurers certain they'd

emerge later with Auriel's Bow as their prize. On nearly every occasion, Gelebor ended up finding the hunters lying dead somewhere in the Forgotten Vale, pierced with the arrows of the Betrayed more often than not. Only two had ever successfully returned the silver ewer to him, with the weapon of his lord in their possession and his fallen brother's blood on their hands. Every now and then, the pair had returned to visit him in the Chantry. *I suppose I'll never look upon either of their faces again, now.*

When Gelebor held the initiate's ewer and closed his eyes, sometimes he could picture himself standing once more in the Inner Sanctum, Vyrthur beside him free of the vampiric affliction that had led to his ruin. But such wishful thoughts were for children taking their first plodding steps in the snow. Vyrthur was dead and buried next to the rubble of the Inner Sanctum he'd once taken a vow to protect at all costs. For all Gelebor knew, the rest of the Chantry was now in a similar state. Sometimes he wondered if their sovereign had forgiven his brother in the end, or if Vyrthur was writhing in torment in Coldharbour, a victim in life and death of the merciless Molag Bal.

Come, now. To conjure such horrors in your mind in the midst of worship is unbecoming. Gelebor murmured a quiet prayer of forgiveness and continued his mantras. The small room had no windows, so he only knew the passage of time by the dwindling light from the candle next to his bed. Before the flame had burned out completely, there was a cacophony of knocking on the door.

Gelebor's eyes flew open, and he rose. The portal opened, and Slitter stood in the doorway. The Dunmer mercenary had small and cruel eyes like a slaughterfish. Upon their first meeting, Gelebor had thought: *this is a being who has never known kindness.* On Slitter's back, an elven battleaxe gleamed, and past the weapon Mogrul stood watching. The miserly orc had an enchanted axe of his own hanging from his hip.

"Time to pay up, elf." Mogrul grinned, his gold teeth dull in the dimly lit hallway. "Two hundred gold, or you're going to get a lot closer with your god."

Gelebor's eyes narrowed. "This matter between us has been settled, I believe. My debt was forgiven when I did that vile favor for you."

Mogrul slid past Slitter, and made a farce of peering around the small room. "Hmm. I don't see any contract here to support what you say. Maybe we should ask one of the guards outside to help look for it."

Half of the Redoran guard in the city owed Mogrul money. If the orc asked one of them in here, Gelebor was likely to end up in jail with his few possessions seized. *This situation is becoming untenable.*

"Gold, or blood." Slitter stepped in, and Mogrul shut the door behind him. "You'll be spilling one or the other for us in a moment. Your choice."

Gelebor's hands tightened into fists. He had no weapons, but he could still incapacitate or even kill these vagabonds easily. But what would that accomplish? He'd have to flee the city, hide out in the wastes of Solstheim with nothing more than the clothes on his back. And all the blood would make a dreadful mess for Geldis to clean up. That would be no way to repay the innkeeper for his generosity.

He sighed. "Blood it is. Do what you will to me. One day, my sovereign may shine the light of forgiveness on you."

Mogrul chuckled. "Oh, no, you're not getting off that easy. Slitter, tear this place apart. I'm not leavin' this stinking tavern empty handed."

"Wait," Gelebor said. He stepped forward, blocking Slitter's path. "Please. This is a place of worship. Do you hold nothing sacred in your heart, Mogrul?"

Mogrul rubbed two of his fingers together. "Coin. Go on, Slitter."

The mercenary drove a chitin-clad fist into Gelebor's stomach, sending him coughing to the floor. Mogrul chuckled as the elf fell forward, his hood falling off. Slitter kicked the bed against the wall and began tossing aside the scant possessions.

Gelebor's hair fell over his face. He managed to steady himself and rise. Mogrul regarded him with disgust.

"You're some kind of freak. Thought from your skin you were just sick, but your hair's white as bone too. No wonder you're a priest. No one else would take you, lookin' like that."

"Mogrul," Slitter said. He held up the initiate's ewer.

"Ooh." Mogrul pushed past Gelebor and seized the pitcher. "This is real silver. And damned old, too, from the looks of it."

"An ancient trinket," Gelebor said. He pushed the hair back from his eyes, watching the two bandits wearily. "Worthless, unless you're a devotee of my lord."

"Nah, think I'll melt it down."

Gelebor took a step towards them, and Mogrul's fist flew forth a green blur. Gelebor found himself looking up at the ceiling, blood trickling from his lip. A second later, Slitter's armored foot obscured the view, and pain followed. He covered his face with his arms, doing his best to block the blows. Mogrul stood near the dying candle, admiring the initiate's ewer. *That little pitcher is almost as old as me. How tragic both of our journeys will end here, in a place so far from the Great Chantry.*

The door slammed open. Slitter turned to find a loaded crossbow an inch from his face. Geldis aimed the weapon with steady hands.

"Get out of my bar, scum."

Mogrul frowned. "We've been down this road before, Sedri. I don't give a guar's arse what you want. We're staying for as long as we like."

"No longer." Geldis said. "Flee the Netch on your own two feet, or be carried. And leave the pitcher."

No one moved. Slitter stared at Geldis down the length of the crossbow, one of his feet still planted on Gelebor's chest. Mogrul looked thoughtfully at the ewer in his hands, perhaps considering its viability as a thrown projectile. Finally, he dropped it.

"We'll do it your way, this time." Mogrul inclined his head to Slitter, and the latter left the room with a growl. "But you've just made yourself an enemy, innkeep. And you'll find Raven Rock is a very small place when you're on my list of rotten bastards." He followed Slitter out, not looking down at Gelebor as he passed.

Geldis followed them, presumably to ensure they actually left the tavern. Gelebor staggered to his feet, wiping the blood from his face. *By the grace of Auriel, I live another day.* He picked up the ewer and found it no worse for wear. The same couldn't be said for the ruins of his bed. *Or the*

ruins of me, for that matter. The pale face looking back from the reflection of the ewer was quickly growing purple in places.

"They've gone," Geldis said. He'd returned to the doorway, crossbow still in his hand. "But who knows for how long, *sera*. Mogrul has the guard in his can't stay here."

"I want you to have this," Gelebor said. He walked forward and held out the silver pitcher. "For your assistance in saving my life."

"Come now, I won't steal from a priest," Geldis replied, embarrassed. "It was my fault those s'wits did this to you. Musta slipped past while I was grabbing a new batch of sujamma."

"Nevertheless." Gelebor offered the ewer more insistently. "After I flee the city, you'll stand alone against them. Not to mention I owe you rent. Sell this old relic. Use it to hire protection for this place."

"Probably not a bad idea," Geldis admitted. He shifted the crossbow to his other hand and grasped the initiate's ewer, marveling. "You sure? This little beauty looks older than Solstheim. I could probably buy ten mercenaries."

Closer to, older than the Dunmer race. "I'm certain, my friend. You've been kind to me during my stay here, when all others have turned me away." He knelt, and began gathering his few possessions into the pockets of his cloak.

"We're a rough people," Geldis said. "But the rest in Raven Rock woulda warmed up to you eventually, I'm sure. You're just...a little out of place, and we Dunmer are wary of outsiders."

Perhaps if my own race had been more wary of the Dwemer, the Betrayed would walk in the light of day, their sight undamaged. Gelebor grimaced, pulling his armor out from the compartment under the shattered bedframe.

Geldis blinked in disbelief as Gelebor sat down in his chair and began to strap on the ivory chestplate.

"You sure coulda used that a few minutes ago," Geldis said. He leaned against the doorway, collecting himself. "That whole set been under one of my beds for all this time?"

"Yes," Gelebor replied. "My vestments are quite striking." He finished pulling on his last gauntlet and pulled the cloak over his head, hiding most of the armor. "I thought it best to spare the locals."

"You were right." Geldis smiled bitterly. "Mogrul would've had us both dead in seconds if he'd known you had that treasure hiding under his feet."

Gelebor nodded and stood up. He did a last check to make sure he had everything, and then made to leave.

"Wait," Geldis held a hand up. "Where ya plannin' on going?"

"I'm uncertain. I've heard of a tribe of Nords nestled somewhere in the mountains. Perhaps I could rest there for a time."

"The Skaal? They're about as receptive to outsiders as we are, friend. Not to mention you'd likely freeze to death before you got there. "

He smiled. "Unlikely. But have you a better suggestion, Geldis?"

The innkeep bit the inside of his cheek, glancing down the hallway to the sleepy tavern. As far as Gelebor could tell, they were the only ones awake at this hour.

"I know someone in need of a strong worker," Geldis said. "Her residence is a little bit of journey, but damned closer than the Skaal village. If you play your cards right, she might let you stick around for a spell."

Gelebor listened as Geldis gave him directions to this distant dwelling. Despite the circumstances, he was glad to leave the city behind. Staying too long in one place brought back memories he preferred to keep buried. And for too long he'd traveled without a goal or purpose beyond simple survival.

A few hours later, Gelebor left Raven Rock with a full pack of provisions from Geldis and uncertain hope in his heart.

Forsaken

"All I ask for is a pair of boots. How hard could it be?" - Basks-In-The-Sun

Gelebor had only ash and snow for company. The cobblestones beneath his feet were worn and forgotten. In some places the road seemed to disappear entirely. No one on Solstheim had much reason to go deeper inland than the coasts, where Raven Rock and Tel Mithryn stood as the sole beacons of civilization. Even the reavers and bandits hesitated to tread too far into the snowy wasteland before setting up their camps and outposts. The ocean symbolized escape, a potential path to Skyrim or the mainland or anywhere else warmer and more hospitable. Gelebor walked alone, as he always had. Occasionally an ash hopper or guar crossed his path, and he'd pause to watch the creatures for as long as he could. Far above, in the choking gray sky, the sun's rays struggled to break through. *My god is with me. I need no others.* A mantra he'd repeated to himself for thousands of years. Gelebor wondered if someday he'd believe the words.

"If I ever return to Raven Rock, Geldis and I will have to have a long conversation about the definition of 'close.'" He smiled wearily at the curious guar. The little lizard beast slowly moved closer to where Gelebor sat. Before them, a snowy pine forest stretched as far as the eye could see. Behind, the agitated ash wastes smoked and hissed. Gelebor had lost the path hours ago.

"Tell me," Gelebor said. "What manner of person chooses to live so far from the only other beings on an island like this?" *I suppose it's hypocritical of me to pose such a question, given how many years passed in the Vale where I stood completely alone.* Back then, he'd taken to speaking to the deer and rabbits that sometimes approached the Wayshrines, so he wouldn't forget how to form words. *Old habits die reluctantly.*

The guar scurried away when he rose. The sun was setting, and Gelebor wanted to be under the tree cover in case an ash storm formed in the night. The amount of protection the forest provided was meager, but it was preferable to being caught out in the barrens. *I wonder if I'll die out here.* Gelebor hadn't feared death for some time. He'd lived a hundred lifetimes, and as each century passed he grew more anxious to learn about what came after. *Maybe I'll see Vythur again, before dawn arrives.*

He broke through the treeline, searching for any trace of a path through the icy sentinels. There was no sign any men or elves had ever walked this forest; before too long, he'd lost track of the way he came, and each direction seemed to present the same picture. Logic dictated that walking one way on an island would eventually lead one to a coast, but exhaustion forced Gelebor to stop long before he could put that theory to the test. He found a small clearing with a large hollowed tree stump in its center. *As good a place to make a camp as any.* With shaky hands, he unpacked his supplies and set up a small canvas covering over his bedroll. Waking up with a mouthful of ash would be dreadful. Too weary to make a fire, Gelebor fell on to his pillow after eating a handful of his nearly depleted rations. *If I don't wake up in the morning, it may be a blessing.*

Every evening before sleep, Gelebor forced himself to remember. The process often took hours. All the elves of the Forgotten Vale, their names and faces, their songs and sorrows, he had to recall each night lest they be lost to time. Sometimes he feared he'd already forgotten too much for it to matter. Some of the memories were cloudy, indistinct; like images seen through a fog. He'd once thought of putting down the recollections in words, but to do so would take more books than he could carry. *And what if they were ruined in a sudden rain, or taken by curious hands? My people would be lost forever.* An inevitable certainty loomed always at the edges of his awareness: someday Auriel would call him to join the others, and the last echoes of the snow elves would go

from the world.

The first years after leaving had been the easiest. Gelebor had journeyed Skyrim in relative tranquility, living off the land where he could and performing simple jobs when the need for gold arose. Though the country had been much changed since the days of his people, he still beheld many sights that brought joy and sorrow to his old heart. The snowy mountains of the Pale, the glittering glaciers of the Sea of Ghosts, even the rolling tundra of Whiterun and the awe-inspiring arches of Labyrinthian. He admired the tenacity of the ancient Nords, constructing such monuments in a climate so unsuited to their people. Most of the modern natives seemed to do their best to ignore him, and he didn't overly mind. Those he'd encountered in the wilderness had often offered him food and shelter for the night, in return for some of his latest game. Few had been outright hostile, save for the occasional drunk or bitter ex-soldier.

And then, almost a year ago, the Dragonborn Jaxius Amaton had been slain by the Thalmor. The change in attitude towards Gelebor had been almost immediate: innkeepers refused him service, merchants refused to buy his goods, and children ran away when he stepped on to the street. For a time, Gelebor had felt as monstrous as the Betrayed, those twisted subterranean creatures that he'd once called kin. Many high elves received a similar shunning from the locals, but none were treated as harshly.

None of the Altmer had skin so wanting in color, or long sharply curved ears, or hair as stark white as the freshly fallen snow. Even when mistaken as a high elf, Gelebor appeared an outcast. He wondered if some genetic predisposition towards hating snow elves had been passed down from the Nord's ancestors, who'd driven his proud race to extinction thousands of years ago; but such thoughts were unfit for a Knight-Paladin of Auriel, even one in exile.

Eventually Gelebor fell into a troubled sleep, tossing and turning on the rough ground. Flakes of ash and snow fell gently from the surrounding trees, covering him as they covered everything on Solstheim.

He awoke to the sound of snuffling and grunting nearby. Opening one eye a minuscule amount, Gelebor discerned the sun had not yet risen and also that a colossal ursine creature was rummaging through his pack a short distance away. The air had the scent of damp fur and decay. *What an impressive beast.* The few of its kind Gelebor had encountered during his travels in Skyrim had been skittish, brutish, and protective. This bear had not a care in the world but hunger, and paid Gelebor no mind as it tore his satchels to ribbons to get to the wrapped breads and berries. *I suspect that would change, were I to move.* Gelebor resolved to feign sleep unless the situation demanded he kill to protect himself. *If that's even within my power.*

The bear finished eating and sniffed the air. It reared up on its hind legs, and took a heavy step closer, the pine straw crackling underfoot. *Oh, dear. This is no creature of Kyne.* He knew of the manbeasts of Hircine from books, but had never heard of one able to take a form different than wolf. And yet the werebear continued towards him, slaver dripping from its jaws, unconcerned with his state of knowing.

Gelebor rolled out of his tent, drawing the elven dagger that Geldis had gifted him.. He'd no experience with such a weapon, and limited skill with magic. *Thank Auriel I chose to sleep in my armor.* The werebear halted, regarding him with unknowable intent.

"I've no wish to hurt you, child of Hircine," Gelebor said. "Had you asked me to share my rations, I would have gladly obliged. There's no need for conflict. We must be the only living beings for leagues in any direction."

The werebear cocked its head, grunted softly, and nodded. From such a strangely mortal gesture,

he could almost imagine the man behind the curse.

It sprung clear of the ground with a roar that shook the world. Gelebor raised the dagger before being slammed to the ground. His blade sunk into the oily skin of the beast's shoulder. Daedric claws tore splinters of moonstone from his chestplate. Gelebor raised his gauntlets to protect his neck, but soon enough yellow teeth were shredding the ancient metal away like so many knives through hot scrib jelly. Gelebor had no way of harming the werebear, and his defenses would only last a moment longer. *At least I'll soon be reunited with my brothers and sisters.* He had no question of why Auriel had abandoned him to this fate; the chief Divine hadn't raised a finger to protect the rest of the snow elves. The last one didn't expect to be treated differently.

Claws finally found purchase in pale skin, and Gelebor screamed despite himself. The shattered ruins of his ivory chestplate began to turn crimson.

The werebear reared back its head and roared into the sky, slimy drool flying to splatter Gelebor's face. He looked up at the monster through tears of agony and disappointment. And then the point of a glass arrow sprouted from the bear's left eye. It turned its head and another arrow joined the first, and the life slowly drained from its wide red eyes. The werebear fell, and Gelebor didn't have the strength to move out of the way. The corpse crushed his legs and chest, rendering him unable to breathe. This state persisted until black spots appeared in his vision, and a curious warmth surrounded his head. *Auriel, come to take me away. For centuries I've yearned for my sovereign's attention.*

But the dead werebear was pushed off him and the dizziness faded. He opened his eyes to see a slender Dunmer woman with short black hair standing over him, her brow furrowed.

"What in Dagon's eyes are you?" She held a glass longbow, and light armor of a similar material. Though she appeared reasonably young, thin lines were visible at the corners of her eyes. Similar lines had appeared on his own visage in the past years since he'd left the Vale.

"Knight-Paladin Gelebor, former guardian of the Great Chantry of Auriel."

The woman glanced around his campsite. "If this is your chantry, I see why you lost the position. But I didn't ask your name."

"Ah. Well, I'm an Altmer." He felt a bit off balance with this woman, thanks in no small part to the bleeding gashes on his torso. Even trying to sit up summoned an unrelenting pain down nearly every part of his body below the neck. "A high elf."

She snorted. "If you're a high elf, I'm a Chimer. I've killed enough of those prissy s'wits to recognize when I've one bleeding out in my forest."

Gelebor frowned. "Am I to assume you'll let me continue bleeding should I choose not to follow the path of this conversation?"

"Makes no difference to me." The woman stepped over him without looking down. "I came to kill the werebear that's been stealing my game the last few months. Saving some mysterious fool was not on my schedule."

Auriel preserve me, I've been rescued by a pragmatist. If Gelebor didn't get a healing potion or spell soon, he'd be dead in hours. And for whatever reason, that thought was no longer so attractive. There seemed to be little choice but to divulge his secrets to this forest Dunmer.

"I'm a snow elf," Gelebor said.

She turned, eyebrows raised. "A Falmer?"

He winced. "Just snow elf, if you please. The word Falmer has become synonymous with the monstrous blind creatures that inhabit many of Skyrim's cave systems. Our paths diverged quite a while ago now."

"Fair enough." The woman stepped closer, her curiosity obviously piqued. "Are there any more of you?"

"None that I know of. My brother, Vythur, passed away a few years ago."

"Interesting. The last of the snow elves." She looked down at him with an unsettling glint in her eye. "So if I put an arrow in your head, right here in this forest, I'd be rendering an entire race extinct?"

Gelebor smiled. "The Nords did that long before you were born. It's not as if I'm capable of producing more of my kind by planting a bit of my hair in the snow."

"I suppose you're right." She seemed almost disappointed. "In any case, how in Oblivion did you get out here? I came so far into the wilds to avoid people, not to save them. I might have put you down myself if the werebear hadn't got here first."

"Geldis Sadri said an elf living nearby might have work available. Certain circumstances rendered me incapable of remaining in Raven Rock."

"Damned innkeep. I told him to send me a strong orc, not a battered elf."

"So you're the woman in question? It was an orc that gave me some of the bruises, if that factors into your consideration."

She sighed. "I'm Nadene. Nadene Othryn. Not sure what use I have for a broken priest, but Geldis would probably stop sending me food if I just let you die here."

Nadene knelt down and put her hands over his wounds. Gelebor sucked in breath sharply through his teeth, trying not to cry out.

An orange aura pulsed from her palms, providing warm relief to his pain in moments. The openings in his chest slowly closed.

"Many thanks, miss Othryn."

She held up a finger. "One. Never call me that again. Two. That was the only healing spell I know, and it's mainly for emergencies. I'll have to take you back to my home and finish up with some bandages. And then you'll forget you ever met me and go far away."

Gelebor responded, "Very well. Is your dwelling close by?"

Nadene shrugged. "Reasonably close."

He struggled to sit up. "I may need a moment before I can set off."

"You think I'm going to lug your bloodstained carcass all the way through this forest? Just hold still. I'll teleport us."

"I thought teleportation magic to be forbidden in the Empire."

"This is Morrowind, n'wah." Nadene placed her hand on his chest again. This time, her fingers seemed to thrum with potential energy. "Why walk when you can-"

They vanished in a burst of sparks.

Moon-and-Star

The short mushroom tower stood alone in a much larger clearing than the one they'd left behind. Smoke trickled out of a stout chimney on the uppermost outcropping of fungus. Walls of towering pine trees in every direction effectively cloaked the dwelling from accidental discovery. If Nadene hadn't come upon him, Gelebor doubted he'd ever have been able to find this place on his own.

“Stay out here and don't touch anything,” she ordered. Lying on the ground with a serious injury, Gelebor didn't see much room for argument. Nadene walked up the steps leading to the pleasantly round front door, evidently in no hurry. He looked around as best he could while waiting. The Forgotten Vale had been beautiful, but being there so long had made Gelebor yearn for different flora and fauna to gaze upon.

A good place to indulge that desire. A colorful garden spread around the front of the tower, trailing off in each direction from the stairs. Fat bees hovered lazily over the rainbow of vegetation. The flowers and herbs hailed from Skyrim, Gelebor was certain, and none of the native ash plants were represented. Tiny rivers of water danced through the garden soil, though he could see no pond or other source for the liquid. *Nadene has shown remarkable skill in alteration. Perhaps this is another display of her magic.*

Around the side of the tower, a red guar snored in a pen that looked more comfortable than most places Gelebor had lived. Several varieties of flower not present in the garden grew here, likely meant for the creature to nibble on. Beside the pen, a small cart sat empty with a saddle hanging from it.

His savior returned. Nadene stood at the top of the steps, looking down at him.

“I used all my magicka on the teleport, so you'll have to get up these stairs yourself.” Nadene smiled. “Consider it a challenge. If you make it to the door, you win the healing salves I found stored away in the attic.”

“That may be within my power.” Gelebor struggled to his feet, needles of agony shooting down his torso. He hissed in pain with every step.

Nadene watched, her eyebrows raised. He fought to keep tears from his eyes as he struggled up the stairs, fresh bruises on his legs from the werebear making themselves known.

Gelebor managed to speak, “I wasn't aware House Telvanni had an outpost this far inland.”

She crossed her arms. “I'm not one of those crazy wizards. A wise endling should focus on reaching the door, I think, or he may find his offer of bandages rescinded.”

“Condemning me to death for a few innocent questions? You definitely sound like the Telvanni I've heard about.” The burden had eased somewhat, and Gelebor stumbled to the door on shaky feet and braced himself against the wood.

“I'm beginning to see why you got punched in the face.” Nadene pushed open the portal, and he fell into the tower. “Don't get too comfortable.”

The interior was a cozy little affair, with a small spiral staircase leading up from the round central chamber to a loft bedroom. A central hearth burning with bright azure flames cast a dancing light on to the mycelial walls, which were adorned with paintings of alien landscapes and hanging weapons of many types and materials. Around the fire, furniture of an unknown style was arranged

in a circular fashion.

“Wonderful,” Gelebor whispered, eyes wide. “Does this tower have a name?”

“I already told you I'm not Telvanni.” Nadene stepped over him. “I'd say the blood loss was affecting your mind, but something tells me you were always this dim.”

“I'm a little new to this world,” he admitted. “For a long time, I was obligated to protect the Great Chantry. No one else could take my place. This didn't allow much room for travel.”

Nadene grabbed a roll of bandages and a potion bottle from a high shelf. “How long?”

Gelebor hesitated before replying. He didn't yet know the measure of this woman, and she'd threatened to leave him for dead a few times now. “Thousands of years. I stopped counting them a while before I had to leave.”

She returned slowly with the medicine, as if working through a thought.

“Quite a time to be alone,” Nadene finally said. She knelt down and surveyed the ruins of his chest plate, not meeting his eyes.

“Yes.” They didn't talk for a while after that. He leaned back his head on the soft floor as Nadene tossed aside shattered pieces of his armor and bits of cloth from his robe. The loss of the former weighed heavy in Gelebor's heart; the ivory vestments had been with him for such a time, they'd become almost a second skin. Another remnant of his people, lost because of carelessness. *I thank Auriel that the armor survived this long. Without its protection, I would be lying dead next to the werebear in that clearing.*

“Not so white anymore,” Nadene remarked, studying his exposed torso. “You could almost pass for a native, with all this blood and ash.”

He smiled tightly, staring up at the curved ceiling. “I'm not quite hardy enough for that. I've discovered over the past months that every dark elf in Raven Rock is superior to me at nearly every task. This made finding work a bit awkward.”

“The Dunmer are a miserable people. Experiencing pain and hardship is the mainspring of our race. You should be glad you're not better at it. ”

“A bit harsh, to speak of your own kind in such a way.”

Nadene smiled as she used a wet cloth to wipe away the dried blood. “I didn't exclude myself. At least the elves in Raven Rock are miserable together.”

Gelebor winced at the pressure. “I've been meaning to ask why you live so far from your people.”

“So many questions.” She pushed harder with the cloth, and Gelebor groaned. “Too curious for your own good. Answer me this, last of the snow elves. You said you had to leave your chantry. Why?”

“I'd prefer not to speak of that, if it's all the same to you. The memory is unpleasant.”

“I live so far from Raven Rock because I'm sick of helping raise up a bunch of ungrateful elves that'll just be kicked back into the ash in a decade or two.” Nadene put aside the bloodstained rag and measured a length of bandage from the roll. “I've answered your question. Now reciprocate.”

He sighed. "During my long years in the Vale, I've watched the Betrayed – the Falmer – slowly regain some of the intelligence that the Dwemer stole from them. They've built a culture, of sorts, in the dark corners of Skyrim's underground. A vile, reprehensible society of barbed flesh and forbidden magic, but a society nonetheless. This gave me hope they might one day open a dialogue."

"I've never encountered the Falmer, but it sounds like you'd be better off wiping them out." Nadene pressed the bandage over his wound, smoothing the corners with her slim fingers.

"Such an undertaking would be beyond me, both physically and spiritually. To utterly destroy the dim shadow of the snow elves...at the end of the bloodshed, I would have no other choice but to fall on my sword. To join my people in Auriel's kingdom, voluntarily."

"You don't seem too repulsed by the idea." Nadene glanced up at him from her work. "In any case, you still haven't answered me."

Gelebor tried not to think of the day in question, for whenever he summoned the memory to the forefront of his attention, a wave of shame and disappointment came with it. The last time he'd pondered about what had happened for more than a few moments, he'd fallen into a long depression. *But this woman saved my life. I owe her a tale, if nothing else.*

"On a cloudy day in the Vale, I awoke by my wayshrine hearing the cries of an infant. At first, I wasn't sure what the sound was – I hadn't seen or heard a baby for more years than your race has existed. But something in my heart hearkened to the call. For so long I'd watched adventurers walk away after speaking with me, only to end up dead. I just wanted to save someone. I ran towards the sound, away from Auriel's protection. There was a youngling of the Betrayed, scarcely more than a year old, crying alone in the snow. At such a young age, the baby looked similar so similar to my own kind. It recalled memories of my own brother's birth. Memories I'd long thought lost to time. I took a step towards the infant." Gelebor breathed in, and closed his eyes.

"It was a trap," Nadene guessed.

"Yes. The Betrayed fell on me with spells and sword. They had no care for their own youngling's survival, but I managed to attract their attention away from the baby. In the process, I lost my mace and my path back to the wayshrines. They attacked with unrelenting fury. Eventually, day by day, I was driven into the caves and then out into Skyrim. I don't know what they did with the infant."

"Do you ever plan to return?" She patted the bandage and rose to her feet, turning away from him. "To kill the bastards and reclaim your little chapel?"

"To what end?" Gelebor grabbed the handle of the door and pulled himself up. His bruises throbbed at the effort, but the pain in his torso was dulled. "The relics of my sovereign were taken from the Great Chantry years before my exodus. The Inner Sanctum was destroyed, and my afflicted brother put to rest. Only bitter memories and eternal solitude wait for me in the Forbidden Vale. Out here, at least the passage of time has a meaning. My beard grows. My body ages."

Despite her abrasiveness, Nadene seemed to hang on to his every word as he spoke. Gelebor had a feeling she didn't speak to others often. She beckoned to him from the blue hearth, sitting herself down in one of the chairs. He obeyed, glancing as he walked at the bizarre décor on the walls and inhaling the arboreal fragrance of the tower. *It occurs to me I don't really know this woman. She could be a witch or dark sorceress of some kind.*

"Are you a witch?" Gelebor sat down in the chair opposite her, leaning away from the heat of the fire.

Nadene smiled. "Yes. I've healed you up so that you'll be a better thrall when the time comes. It'd be terribly inconvenient if I asked you to fetch my tea and you went and died on the way to the kitchen."

"I have an odd proposition," he said, leaning forward. "Perhaps you're not a witch, and I can serve you in a more willing manner. I'll carry out any tasks you ask of me, maybe not as well as a dark elf but with just as much tenacity and determination. All I ask in return is a place to rest my head."

"Hmm." Nadene drummed her fingers against the arm of the chair. "Sounds like I should just hire a Dunmer, then, yes? Azura knows this island is lousy with them. Or find the strong orc I wanted in the first place, since Geldis has failed me."

"Ah, but the world is full of orcs and dark elves." Gelebor gestured to her decorations. "I can tell you're a woman of discerning taste. No one else in Tamriel could say they have a snow elf in their employ. You'd be the envy of reclusive forest witches from here to Falkreath."

Nadene laughed. "No one knows I live here that would care what sort of elf I use to scrub my dishes. But there's some truth in what I say. You're a little less depressing to have around than one of my own kind would be. And you have better stories."

He nodded. "Thousands of years worth. I often tell them to myself, so I don't forget."

"Alright." She looked at him, biting her lip. "A trial run. For entertaining me this long, you've earned a night's rest. Tomorrow, you'll go out into the forest with my guar and find him a mate. He's the last of his clutch, and I miss all the little ones scurrying about."

"Agreed," Gelebor replied without hesitation. "You have my undying gratitude for granting me this chance. Your guar will have a marriage ceremony that Mara herself would shed tears to witness."

"We'll see about that." Nadene raised her hand, and a long fur cloak floated down from the upper level to fall on his head. "Put this on. You can't go mate-hunting with your bare chest exposed. The lady guar's need to focus on Dagoth Ur."

"That's your beast's name?" Gelebor slipped on the garment, finding it a reasonable fit.

"Yes. Mean anything to you?"

He shook his head. "If it's all the same, I'll call him 'Ur' for short. Would you like me to sleep on the couch or the floor?"

Nadene huffed in amusement, and pointed her chin towards the door. "I feel that you and my baby need to bond a little before your gentleman's escapade. Besides, I don't even know you aren't an albino Altmer with an impressive imagination and creeping eyes. Go on, Ur won't mind sharing."

Gelebor rose from the chair and bowed. "As you command, miss Othryn."

She glared. "The guar pen is too good for you. Get out of sight before I change my mind."

He hid a smile behind his hand, and thanked her again for her kindness before leaving the tower. The sun had fallen, and fireflies hovered around the clearing, dim beacons in the darkness. He used their light to find the pen. Ur was still snoring away, and Gelebor laid down nearby in the bouncy straw. He fell into a restful sleep listening to the gentle in and out of breath, content for the moment with the state of his life and faith.

Tribes Unmourned

"Dagoth Ur is dead. I hope we will no longer be troubled by his dreams. But I wonder, too, what the ghost of a god would be. And can a dead god dream?" - Hassour Zainsubani

Gelebor awoke to a red guar snuffling at his shoulder. He patted Ur's snout gently and stood up, stretching his long legs. The pen, with its piles of clean straw and bundles of packed cloth, had indeed been one of the more comfortable beds of his life. *Vythur would be bewildered to see me now, as either of the elves I knew him as.* The morning sun peaked over the top of the treeline, bathing the mushroom tower in dappled rays of orange. The fragrance of garden flowers filled the air, a stark and welcome contrast to the devastation of the rest of Solstheim. In a way, Nadene's clearing was an island of its own, an oasis of life and beauty among the gray wastes.

"A marvelous day for love's discovery," he remarked to Ur.

"Morning, boys." Above them, Nadene leaned over the porch railing with a steaming cup of tea in her hands. She wore a nightrobe and had a small linen sack at her feet. "Remember: either Ur comes back with a lady friend, or Ur comes back alone."

"You should come along." Gelebor ran his pale fingers along the petals of a colorful flower patch growing along the curve of the tower. "It's sure to be a thrilling venture, whatever the outcome."

"No thanks. A woman can only be a part of so many bestial courtship rituals in two hundred years time. I'm sure you'll be fine alone."

She's lived here for that long? Fascinating. "Don't fret. I've quite a bit of practice in the art of solitude."

"I was talking to Ur, fetcher." She pushed the sack through the porch rails with her foot. "The seeds and berries in there will attract guar. They'll also help keep Ur close."

"Wouldn't it be wise for me to have a leash of some sort?" Gelebor snatched up the treasure before Ur could lunge. The red guar pushed against the fence gate, squeaking excitedly.

"Unnecessary. My guar always return here. They know where their food comes from." Nadene waved a dismissive hand at the surrounding forest. "Now run along. Ur's future lover is somewhere in those trees. And watch out for more werebears; they usually hunt in packs." With that, she turned away. A second later the tower door shut.

"Let's go, my friend." Gelebor opened the gate and Ur scurried out. Just as Nadene predicted, he stuck close to Gelebor's left side, where the sack was secured in the pocket of his cloak. Even with the thick garment on, the sun's heat was not disagreeable. His new employer had picked wisely the spot of her dwelling, where the warmth of the volcanic wastes converged with the frost of the ancient glades. Ur led him to a small dirt path leading into the forest, presumably used before on expeditions of a similar nature. If not for the guar, Gelebor would never have found the trail himself.

"I hope she wasn't serious about the werebears," he said to Ur. They went languidly through the snowy pines, only the crunching of the ground beneath breaking the frigid silence. A few hardy birds flew from tree to tree far above, sending down clumps of snow, but otherwise there was no sign of life in their surroundings. *Perhaps we'll have to journey to the ash wastes. I'm not certain how far they are, given that we teleported here.*

As the hours passed, Gelebor was reminded of walking the forests of the Vale with his fellow knights, to maintain the more remote Wayshrines or gather food for the Great Chantry's many worshippers. The Betrayed had first surfaced when he'd gone on one such quest. From the Wayshrine of Sight, Gelebor and Prelate Athring had watched as smoke ascended the sky from the Inner Sanctum. Hunched, monstrous figures had streamed in from caves around the Vale, and even from such a distance Gelebor had known their numbers to be overwhelming. *Was Auriel watching as solemnly as the elves that loved him most were massacred by those they'd once called kin? How many of my brothers and sisters were kneeling in desperate prayer in their final moments?*

The only action his lord had taken was to permit some of the prelates to return as ghostly shades, lost to all senses and confused when they wandered beyond their meager boundaries. Even Prelate Athring, who had walked off the tallest cliff in the Vale rather than persist in the new cruel world where the word Falmer was a curse, had been brought back to his Wayshrine after death. At the time, Gelebor hadn't questioned the wisdom of Auriel. Now he thought it near unforgivable that his old friends had been deprived of their final rest to guard the totems of a people that would never return to prayer. *Perhaps I was as much a ghost as any of them. Perhaps my sole purpose was to provide greedy heroes the opportunity to acquire Auriel's Bow, to snatch up a powerful artifact hidden among the decaying bones of my race.* He'd been ripped from the Vale not long after the Dragonborn and his friend had completed their task. Perhaps that hadn't been mere coincidence.

These treasonous thoughts come too easily for a Knight-Paladin, Gelebor chided himself. It also wasn't coincidence that his life had been saved twice in two weeks by the kindness of strangers. *Auriel watches over me, even here.*

Ur stopped, chirping at the air, and Gelebor almost tripped over him. The guar took off in a random direction, hopping and squeaking madly. Gelebor had to jog swiftly to keep up. *Glad I'm not wearing my armor now, at least.* He ducked under branches and stepped deftly over rocks, fighting to keep Ur in sight. If he lost track of Nadene's pet, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to navigate back to her tower alone.

"Slow down," Gelebor gasped. He grabbed the berry pouch from his flapping cloak and waved it in the air, hoping to attract Ur's attention. The guar halted, racing back towards him, and Gelebor was so taken aback he tripped over a large root and tumbled head over heels down the incline. The ground rose up to slam against his injured body several times, until he finally stilled at the foot of a massive tree.

Gelebor groaned and wiped the dirt and ash from his face. The cloak Nadene had given him was filthy and torn, and his battered limbs sported fresh bruises. Fortunately, the bandages on his torso seemed undamaged.

"I believe this island is killing me, Ur," Gelebor said wearily. Ur was licking up the contents of the berry pouch, which had split open during the fall. "And it's doing so over a painfully long period of time."

Their attention was drawn to a rustling in the bushes. A purple guar plodded through the snow towards them, sniffing cautiously in the direction of the spilt berries. Ur continued eating, oblivious. But Gelebor couldn't let this chance go to waste. *Ur comes back with a lady friend, or Ur comes back alone.* The thought of returning to Raven Rock in failure was too painful to even consider. He stood up slowly, careful to not make any sudden movements.

The purple guar began eating next to Ur, and he looked up in surprise, grunting softly. *I wonder when he last encountered one of his own kind.* Gelebor wasn't sure where to go from here. Nadene hadn't explained how the guar would decide if they were fit for each other or not. He wasn't even

sure if it was a female guar now finishing off the berries next to Ur.

"Peace to you, guar of Solstheim."

The sound of his voice startled the beast, and it shot off wide-eyed into the forest. *No!* Gelebor ran after it, Ur following close behind. Fortunately, the guar's purple skin was highly visible among the whites and browns of the forest, and this time Gelebor kept on the look out for high roots. *This little creature is my salvation.* Little by little, he was gaining on the guar. Being stuffed with berries must have slowed it down a tad.

They broke through to an opening in the forest. *Auriel's mercy. This forest is not so godless after all.* A towering crimson shrine dominated the clearing. Dark and crumbling stone held up the construction, and faded runes of an unrecognizable origin were smeared all over. Newer designs in an ugly green hue had been placed over them, somewhat recently. The fresh paints depicted scenes of a gruesome nature: humanoid figures with missing body parts, children with mouths opened in silent screams, crowds with their arms raised in malevolent worship. Gelebor knew from his first glance that whoever this totem celebrated, new designs or old, they were a sworn enemy of the glorious Aedra and everything they'd created. The purple guar looked up, momentarily stunned, and Gelebor grabbed it firmly.

"You there," a woman's voice called out. "Stop where you are." From around the shrine, heavy footsteps. There was no time to hide. A figure in strange garments approached. The armor seemed similar to the chitin many of the natives wore, but a singular wicked eyepiece took the place of the signature goggles. Instead of a chestplate and greaves, the woman wore a light burgundy robe, and a large red medallion stretched down from her shoulder plates to gleam with dire power. "Name yourself."

"I'm called Gelebor." He hesitated for a moment before continuing, then laughed at himself inwardly. *Now would be a poor time to begin fearing death.* "A Knight-Paladin in the service of Auriel. Akatosh, to many. My apologies for intruding on your prayer."

"No one has knelt before these stones for centuries. I'd expect an Altmer to have a better grasp of history. Are you so ignorant as to not recognize the sigils of the Sixth House?" She drew a cruel-looking dagger from her hip. Behind Gelebor, Ur had finally caught up.

"My knowledge of Morrowind's past is imperfect, I admit." Gelebor tensed his sore legs, preparing to run at any moment. Unarmored and unarmed, he had no chance of surviving an encounter with this strange woman's blade. "Though I believe I recognize the newer markings on the shrine. Are you a servant of Namira?"

"You insult me." The woman took a step towards him, and Gelebor took a step back. "I serve only the prince of murder, lies, and deception. You speak to an assassin of the Morag Tong."

"I see. You don't seem to be employing the latter two of your deities' strengths, seeing as you've just told me your identity." Gelebor slowly inched away, the purple guar resistant to his pull.

He heard the smile in her voice as she responded. "I'm searching for a Dunmer woman who's been marked for honorable execution longer than any other. Each time, the price has gone up. Many have failed to find her, and more than that have died by her hand."

"I wish you good fortune in that endeavor, but as we are two guar and a male elf, we can't really be of assistance."

"Halt, s'wit. I know this Dunmer lives nearby. I see the guar behind you is well fed, and lacks the

wildness of forest beasts."

"Ah, yes. A lucky find. He'll fetch me a fine price in Raven Rock."

The assassin circled around him, dagger raised, blocking his escape. "You're foolish to try to trick a follower of Mephala. Akatosh has no power on this island of the Daedra. Lead me to my target, and I may let you flee with your life."

He sighed. There were no dark elves around to rescue him this time. He knelt, and gently let go of the purple guar. It scampered off, and Ur swiftly followed. *Good luck, my friend.*

"You're wrong," Gelebor said.

"What?"

"Wherever the sun shines, Auriel is with me." He stood up, stretching his shoulders. Before Knight-Paladins were allowed to wield weapons, they first had to master the combat of bare fists. He did not recall fondly those hours of martial drills, sparring with his fellow trainees, bare-chested and sweating in the morning snow. But they would serve him well now. "You can still leave. I've no quarrel with you or your god."

She laughed. "I didn't come here to kill you, priest, but my honor demands I defend myself. I won't feel regret when I stand over your corpse." Faster than wind, her dagger sliced forward.

Gelebor dodged under her arm and slammed his elbow into her face, shattering the eyepiece and sending her reeling. Quickly, he danced out of reach of her blade.

She growled and tore off the damaged helmet, throwing it aside. Her crimson eyes held him in more contempt than he thought existed in the world.

Before she could attack again, Gelebor rushed forward. She hesitated for only a moment, caught off guard, but it was enough time for him to grab her dagger arm. They wrestled, grunting and panting, each trying to twist the weapon into an opportune position. The assassin was powerful, but obviously inexperienced in unarmed combat. The outcome was a foregone conclusion. Gelebor found the right angle and sent a silent prayer to Auriel. Then he fell backwards with her arm in his grasp.

The woman screamed in agony as her bones broke and the dagger fell into the grass. Gelebor snatched the weapon and watched as she yelled curses and threats, cradling her injured arm.

"Finish me, n'wah." She looked at him hatefully. "A crippled Morag Tong assassin is worthless. I'll never again spill blood with this arm."

"How unfortunate," he said quietly. "I'm not going to kill you. Leave this place, while you still can."

The assassin didn't take her eyes off of him as she retreated into the woods, fury apparent in every stilted step. He waited a while after she'd left, watching the treeline. *I've a feeling this isn't the last I'll see of her.*

"Khajiit approaches unarmed, elf. Please lower your own blade."

Gelebor gasped, turning with the dagger raised. A Khajiit in steel plate armor had entered the clearing, his longword sheathed.

"You do not appear to have taken my advice." The Khajiit wore a thick fur hood, and peered at him curiously. "I am Kharjo. Does the sickly elf have a name?"

"Yes," he replied, lowering the weapon. "I'm Knight-Paladin Gelebor, servant of Auriel. Apologies for my aggression; I've just fought off another visitor to this shrine, one of murderous intent. A Morag Tong assassin, searching for a new friend of mine."

"Understandable." Kharjo looked up at the bizarre shrine. "These stones are visible from quite a distance. It is inevitable that a totem of such evil would attract followers of the same making, yes?"

"If I may ask, Kharjo, what brings you so far from civilization?"

"My response may awaken suspicion in you, but have no fear. Khajiit seeks an audience with likely the same elf your assassin sought. Though I have no wish to invade her privacy. I simply wish for you to deliver a message to miss Othryn, and to invite her to join us at the Retching Netch."

Nadene is becoming quite popular in this forest. "Your message?"

"Tell her that servants of darkness walk once more in the shadow of the mountain. Tell her that she must return where she began. And tell her that she is not forgotten; that the Twin Lamps shine in remembrance, even now."

"Very well. I'll bring your words back to Nadene." The message was nonsense to Gelebor, but he respected the Khajiit's wishes.

"We are grateful."

"Might I ask you for a favor in return?" He'd suddenly realized that without Ur, he had about as much clue about how to get back to Nadene's tower as the assassin. "I've misplaced two guar. One red, the other a lighter shade of purple. They are intended to fall in love, though I'm not certain of the purple's gender."

Kharjo inclined his head towards the opposite side of the shrine, whiskers twitching in amusement. "Khajiit can lay that matter to rest. Your purple beast is a female, or else presently quite uncomfortable."

Gelebor walked to where Kharjo was standing, and followed his gaze. "Oh, dear. I suppose this was the whole idea, but I'd been hoping they'd wait until we got back."

"Love is oftentimes inconvenient. I wish you and your beasts warm days and cool nights, Knight Gelebor." With that, Kharjo left them.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the mushroom tower. The two guar had slowed down, exhausted from the days events, so Gelebor had no trouble keeping up. The sight of the mycelial spire was a surprising comfort considering how little time he'd spent there. Ur and his new mate made for the guar pen. The round windows of the tower glowed blue, and colorful smoke trickled from the chimney; Nadene was still awake, awaiting their arrival. Gelebor closed the pen gate and ascended the stairs, his bones weary and his old wounds crying out. *Perhaps one day, I'll go to rest on Solstheim without my body aching.* There was a comforting warmth in his muscles, though, from his brawl with the assassin. It had been too long since he'd exerted himself in such a way. *I hope she heeds my warning.*

He entered quietly, in case he was wrong about his matron's state of consciousness. The scents of the tower fell on him like a cool blanket: fresh herbs and flowers, earth and mycelial matter, faint traces of oils used to maintain armors and weapons. Nadene's shadow flickered against the back

wall, stooped in concentration. She sat in one of the chairs around the hearth, and had not yet noticed him.

"Nadene," Gelebor called out as he approached. "I've returned."

He arrived in time to see her fold away a letter into a pocket of her night cloak, a strange look on her face. But when Nadene looked up again, it was with the same challenge and provocation she'd presented since their first meeting.

"I'll admit, I'm surprised to see you again." Her eyes traced down his battered body. "Though it looks like you've managed to hurt yourself again. Your fragile little snow elf body bruises as easily as a fresh belladonna berry." She didn't ask if Ur had found a mate. He found it pleasing that she placed enough trust in him to know he'd not return with the task unfinished.

"There were some developments," Gelebor replied, collapsing into the chair opposite her. "We encountered two characters of note, as well as a shrine to gods unknown."

Nadene drummed her fingers against the arm of her chair. "I'm aware of the shrine."

"The new markings, as well?"

She leaned forward and grabbed his shoulders, eyes wide. "New markings? New markings on a fucking Sixth House shrine?" Her voice was almost hysterical.

"The designs were made by worshipers of Namira," Gelebor said, taken aback by her sudden panic. "The Daedric Prince of darkness and revulsion."

"Oh." Nadene winded down, settling back into her chair. "I've not had dealings with her before. Probably just some forest cult I'll have to go wipe out sooner or later. But go on about these strangers in my woods."

"The first was an assassin of the Morag Tong. Meant for you, I believe."

"B'vek." Nadene sighed. "Every few decades, some s'wits in Hlaalu convince those old losers to come after me again. They're still bitter about losing their place on the Grand Council. One nice thing about the Morag Tong; if you kill enough of them, they go away for a long time. They have some foolish notion of honor. So where'd you bury the body? If her friends find her corpse soon, they'll probably fuck off back to the mainland."

"I didn't kill her. She posed no threat after I broke her arm."

"You did what?" Nadene stared at him, mouth set in a thin line. "You're not really telling me you left that murderous Mephala-loving bitch alive in my backyard."

Gelebor nodded.

She cursed at him and stood up, reaching out to twist a dial on the hearth. The azure flames went out and they were plunged into darkness.

"Now I'm going to have to sleep with one eye open until she resurfaces," Nadene snapped. "Except next time she'll be as furious as a cliff racer. You've gone and made it personal."

"I'm sorry, Nadene." Gelebor's shoulders slumped. "I'm not your hired mercenary. She didn't choose to attack me or the guards after being disabled. I won't take life in cold blood, even for you."

"Great." She ran a hand over her face. "Fine. It's done with. Tell me about the other fetcher you met in my forest."

"A Khajiit warrior, named Kharjo. He was also searching for you, though without malicious intent."

"Never heard of him." Nadene levitated a few candlesticks from one of the hanging shelves to land on the small table between them. "Light these up. I don't know any fire spells."

He smiled. "Then you're still better off than me. I know no spells whatsoever."

She glared at him for a moment, but then the corner of her mouth curled up. "How can an elf go thousands of years worshipping the sun without learning how to light a candle?"

"Auriel created me for a different purpose," Gelebor replied. Nadene reached under the table and withdrew a few dry bundles. She rubbed a few of them together until thin wisps of flame grew, and then lit the candle wicks. Unlike the hearth, the light burned as orange as the eyes of a vampire.

"You're quite the alchemist," he complimented.

She shook her head. "I know a few tricks, but never got farther than that."

He raised an eyebrow. "Then why all the ingredients?"

"I enjoy the colors. If all I had to look at was gray dirt and gray sky and gray plants, I'd have cut out my eyes by now. I don't know how those rubes in Raven Rock can stand it."

"With an exceeding amount of irritation and spite."

She smiled with her eyes. "What did this Kharjo want from me?"

"He said to deliver this message: servants of darkness walk once more in the shadow of the mountain. You must return where you began. You are not forgotten; the Twin Lamps shine in remembrance, even now."

"Utter gibberish, it sounds like." She showed no reaction to the words, though Gelebor couldn't tell if she was being deceptive. "Pay it no mind. I certainly won't."

"Are you certain?" Gelebor leaned forward. "He wished to meet you in Raven Rock. This Khajiit knew your name, and the general location of your tower. Surely he's at least worth talking to."

"Nope. Maybe he was another assassin, probably trying to trick you. Azura knows you're naive enough to believe anything."

"Alright." For whatever reason, he felt disappointed in her response. "Though I feel you're hiding things from me. I hope you know I can be trusted, whatever your secrets."

"I'll trust you not to indulge that dangerous curiosity of yours. I need a laborer and a guard, Gelebor, not a confidant." With a wave of her hand, Nadene put out the candles. "Well done with Ur. You've earned the couch. I doubt you'd get much sleep in the pen tonight anyway, with those two lovebirds going at it."

He smiled faintly, though he could barely see her. "I can remain here, then?"

"For now." Nadene's crimson eyes glowed in the darkness. "I haven't lived with another elf in many years. But so far, my uses for you outweigh my lack of tolerance for others."

"That's very kind of you."

"Bah." She turned away and began to climb the staircase to the loft. "If you start snoring, it's back with the guards in an instant. I don't care how frisky they get."

Gelebor watched her leave. After a few minutes had passed, he knelt before the hearth and began his evening mantras. He only mouthed the words, so as not to disturb Nadene.

Even so, soon enough he heard footsteps on the balcony above.

"No one is listening, you know." Her voice was quieter than usual. "This is a godless place."

He silently continued his prayers to Auriel, not looking up. Nadene's presence lingered for a moment, and then she left him alone in the cool darkness.

New Gods on the Black Isle

"Namira, whose sphere is the ancient Darkness; known as the Spirit Daedra, ruler of sundry dark and shadowy spirits; associated with spiders, insects, slugs, and other repulsive creatures which inspire mortals with an instinctive revulsion." - The Book of Daedra

The steam seeping from the thermal vents reminded Eola of home. She held her hand over one of the cracks in the rock, watching her skin redden, waiting until the last possible moment before moving it away. The others stood waiting, silent in their reverence. Lanterns of the Dwemer illuminated the cave, treasures the coven had taken from Markarth. The mysteries of their operation were beyond even her understanding, but something in Vvardenfell seemed to hearken to the forgotten tools of the lost race. The lamps had suddenly activated upon being brought to the shore. This expedition had taken years of research on her part, and it was all paying off in execution.

"Banning," Eola whispered, still examining her burned hand. "You will go west, to Balmora. Become a local. Wear the chitin armor we brought; Bretons stand out on this isle of elves. Bring everything else you need to make our dreams into reality. Pack well: the journey will be arduous. You'll know when the time has come."

The old houndmaster nodded and left them, his soft footsteps echoing down the stone passageway. His role in her plans was simple but essential. She had confidence in his abilities, but well understood the limits of his intelligence. The men of the coven were loyal, simple beasts. Sanyon, one of the two worshipers left behind on Solstheim, was the exception.

"And me?" Hogni Red-Arm looked up at her with wide, eager eyes. *Like a dim puppy. How adorable.* "I wanta serve our lady too, Eola."

"You will, my love. Do not fret. I need you to go east, to the Telvanni outposts across the shore. They once employed slaves quite extensively, and won't question a Breton chef pledging to serve them without promise of payment or power. This arrogance will be their undoing. Take only what you need to survive the journey."

Hogni hesitated, perhaps unwilling to throw himself so willingly into servitude. But Eola's gaze, one eye an empty socket and the other a poison green, bore into him without warmth. *We all have our parts to play for the Lady of Decay.* Finally the greasy simpleton nodded, and followed in the footsteps of Banning.

Lisbet, lovely and loyal Lisbet, stepped forward and waited for instruction. Eola smiled and moved closer, holding out her burned hand. Lisbet held the damaged flesh to her nose and inhaled deeply.

"When you ate your brother, my dear, I knew you were one of us." Eola circled the Nord, rubbing her shoulders. "When your husband joined him, and you blamed his death on the Forsworn, I knew you were one of our best and brightest. We're going to do wonderful things together, Lisbet."

"But we're so few." Lines of worry creased her pretty face. "After the men have gone, we'll stand alone. Will Sanyon and Nimphaneth be coming from Solstheim?"

"I don't think so," Eola murmured. "But we never stand alone. Our god is with us, and others will come."

"Others?"

"Yes." Near the lanterns, a staff was leaning against the cave wall. A long shaft of yellow bone led

up to a grim skull ornament, small wicked horns sprouting out the sides. Eola inclined her chin towards it. "Our repressed brothers and sisters will feel the true hunger, and rise up to join our ranks. When our feasting blades cut into the rare meat of prophecy, Vvardenfell will become an island of Namira. And someday, all of Tamriel."

"I've been thinking about the promised meat," Lisbet admitted. "Sometimes I dream of that day. I wake up so ravenous."

"My poor sister." Eola shifted closer, putting her hands on Lisbet's waist. "Your wait will come to an end soon enough. Even now, the meat walks the foreseen path towards us. Until then, we have some planning to do while the boys are away."

Lisbet groaned appreciatively, and grabbed the burned hand to move it higher. Eola hissed sharply, tears of agony running down her cheeks, and then started laughing. Soon enough, they forgot about foolish Banning and Hogni entirely, and about planning, and surrendered themselves to pleasure and pain under the hungry eyes of Namira.

"So you guarded this amazing bow for centuries, and never learned how to fire the blasted thing?"

Gelebor delicately salted his eggs, tapping the bottom of the shaker with a fingernail. They sat on the tower porch, the morning sunlight passing through the trees above like flour through a sieve. Below them, the two guards wrestled in the tall grasses.

"It wasn't mine to fire," he said simply. "What if I'd accidentally broken Auriel's relic before someone earned the right to wield it? That would've been terribly awkward for me and the Dragonborn both."

"Jaxius Amaton is the one who snatched up your little treasure?" She chewed her own eggs thoughtfully.

"Yes. With the help of a kind woman he traveled with. Have you ever met?"

"When that whole Miraak mess was occurring, I found boredom pushing me towards stupidity. I heard the Dragonborn was on the island, and went looking for him."

"I recall having some remarkable conversations, on the occasions that he visited the Vale." The guards were now racing up and down the stairs, panting excitedly.

"We never spoke. I could hear him from leagues away, and from there it was just a matter of following the trail of corpses. I found him raising a racket with some other fool Dunmer, knocking down trees with his voice. They were trying to kill a dragon, and making a right mess of it."

"Did you intervene?"

"No." Nadene crossed her legs. "I try not to interact with idiots when I can avoid it. The day he left Solstheim was the day I stopped fearing my tower would be accidentally knocked over in the night. Besides, he was as much Dunmer as you are. He was raised in Cyrodiil, and chose to live in Skyrim. The former I can barely stand, and the latter I loathe. We had nothing in common."

"Understandable." He finished the last of his meal, and watched the dancing guards. "The day is young, miss Othryn. I'm ready to accomplish any task you put before me."

"Terrific." She clicked her tongue, and tossed a bit of egg to Ur. He caught it deftly as the other guard watched in awe. "No reproductive shenanigans this time. Come with me."

Gelebor penned up the guar and followed after Nadene back into the tower. The hearth was still dead, but soon after waking Nadene had asked him to throw back the curtains on all the round windows. Dim forest sunlight filled the mushroom tower, reminding Gelebor of what a glorious and living dwelling it was. She led them to one of the hanging weapon racks and floated down an ancient Dwemer mace. As the weapon descended, intruding sunlight glinted across the metal and revealed the presence of enchantment.

"This mace belonged to Ane Teria, a powerful crusader," Nadene said. Gelebor wrapped his hand around the cold golden hilt. "The enchantment wears out any enemy you strike. Helps to end fights more quickly."

Gelebor marveled at the mace. "I'm unworthy of such a gift."

"It's more for my sake than yours," she replied, glancing away. "I don't want the cutthroat you let escape to murder me in my sleep because my bodyguard was ill equipped."

"Nevertheless." He clipped the mace to his belt, glad to feel the weight of protection once more. "You put thought into your selection. You care about more than you let on. Thank you."

"You don't know me, Gelebor. And you don't want to know me."

"I know you've lived here for a long time. I know you once helped your people in some way, but now they disappoint you."

She shook her head, dismissing him. "You need to know how to use a bow if you want to be any use. A hundred maces won't do you any good from across a field." He followed her outside and around to the back of the tower, passing the sleeping guar. Hanging chimes jingled gently in the breeze. She pointed to a dead pine near the edge of the forest, pocked with old arrow wounds.

"There's your target. The first tree I ever planted in this wasteland."

The first tree. Gelebor suddenly saw the forest around them in a new light. "What did this area look like when you got here?"

"Tree stumps and ash. Fortunately, the second is a wonderful fertilizer." Nadene handed him her glass bow and a quiver full of iron arrows. "We're going to stay here until you hit the dead pine."

"Just once? Should be easy enough."

It was not easy enough. Gelebor sent projectiles in nearly every direction, into the thick mycelial walls of the mushroom tower and soaring precariously over the guar pen. He shot arrows north, south, east, and west. Branches fell and birds chirped in anger and confusion. The sun itself, his sovereign, seemed unsure how to proceed, hiding behind clouds as if afraid of being struck. Nadene watched, eyes wide in shock or terror. An hour passed in this way, until sweat dripped from his pale face and a single arrow remained in the quiver.

"Put the weapon down," Nadene said, approaching with her arms held high. She'd been hiding behind the edge of the tower since his tenth attempt. "You have dangerous hands. Auriel was really playing with fire, letting you hold on to his bow for so long. It's a miracle you didn't plunge the world into darkness by accident."

"Perhaps you're right." Gelebor looked around at the devastation he'd wrought, disappointed. It would take hours to clean up all the arrows and debris.

Small hands gripped his arms from behind, and Gelebor stiffened.

"Relax, endling. I'm trying to show you how to hold the damned bow, not jump your bones."

"Ah, yes. Apologies. Please continue."

He relaxed the best he could while she adjusted his elbows and forearms. Soon enough, he was holding the bow in what he felt was a very awkward position, but at least it was pointing towards the tree this time. Gelebor almost lost his concentration when she grabbed hold of his leg and started shifting it around.

"You need to have the right stance," Nadene said, manhandling his lower limbs into her desired places. "All of your power, pointed in one direction."

"As you say," Gelebor replied. He'd not felt another being's benevolent touch since before the genesis of the Cyrodiilic Empire. Nadene was nearly as rough as Mogrul had been, back in the Retching Netch, but he preferred her hands by far.

"There you go." Nadene stood up. Gelebor felt as stiff and tightly wound as an automaton of the Dwemer. The memory of her touch on his skin. "Now shoot the tree."

Gelebor breathed deeply, closed one eye, and released the bow string. The arrow flew forward, straight and true, but not quite right. He saw even as the projectile was released that it would fly just right of the target. *Oh, well.* But then the arrow changed direction at the last second, and plunged deeply into the gray bark of the dead pine.

Nadene lowered her hand quickly. "Wow. You've finally done it."

He smiled wearily. "You don't need to coddle me, you know. I'm not some temple novice who'll collapse every time I fail at a task."

She shrugged. "I was tired of standing out here. Besides, how do you know it wasn't Auriel who moved the arrow? He has to be good for something besides magical bow production."

"Silence," he said, and was surprised at the sharpness of his voice. *This woman awakens feelings in me I thought to be lost long ago.* "You can make light of me until the oceans dry up and the moons set on a dying world, Nadene. But I would ask you to not to mock my god in the light of day."

She bristled, hands clenching into fists. "I'll mock your blighted god all I want. No deity has anything to say to me, especially in Morrowind, and I'll be damned if I'm going to bow to the sun because your feelings got hurt."

His own anger rushed to the surface, eager to be released after the long dormancy. Gelebor felt beneath his feet the cliff he was standing on, and knew well the consequences of stepping over: solitude, exile, a return to form. But oh well. He was tired of Nadene playing with him like a cat with a new toy. He turned, well aware of how he towered over her petite form, and glared fiercely.

"So there's more to this lost little elf than it seems," she said, challenge in her eyes. "And at first I thought there was nothing past your polite priest facade."

"You're wrong. I don't hide behind masks," Gelebor replied. "Not like you. I'm beginning to see why you live alone out here, Nadene. Living with yourself is easy enough, I've discovered. Too easy. You're afraid of someone seeing past your mask, aren't you?"

"You know nothing about me, fool."

"I know you're frightened that I'll leave, and frightened that I'll stay. You make me tea, gift me a

weapon, and then insult my god and my race. You know the pain you'll feel if I depart, but it's a pain you've felt before from others you've pushed away. It's familiar. But learning to live with someone else is strange and new and presents challenges of its own."

She turned away. For a moment, it seemed she was considering his words, and Gelebor had hope this confrontation would end peacefully. And then she turned back to him with poison in her countenance.

"You're probably familiar enough with abandonment," Nadene said. She took a step towards him, an ugly smirk on her face. "Where was Auriel when the Falmer were being slaughtered by the tens of thousands?"

"I told you, don't use that word."

"Where was your god when the Snow Prince fell on this very island, to the blade of a Nord child?"

"What?" Gelebor ran a shaky hand over his face. *She must be lying, trying to provoke a reaction.* "I hadn't known his end-"

"Where was Auriel when you tried to save that Falmer baby? "

"Please-"

"Where was he when your brother died and left you alone in the world?"

His fury and shock grew to an inevitable climax. Gelebor lashed out with his fist, blind and uncoordinated in his anger. At the last second, some primal part of him that had been nurtured over eons redirected the direction of the blow. Nevertheless, he made a connection. Nadene's bow shattered in her arms. Shards of moonstone and malachite fell to the grass. The sounds of the forest seemed to dampen in light of their spat.

Gelebor beheld his closed fist, mouth agape. *I've fallen further than I ever suspected. To be driven purely by emotion...*

"That's one way to avoid archery practice," Nadene said quietly. She levitated the pieces of the bow into a tidy pile and then dropped them gently on the rear porch steps. "A necessary sacrifice. I had to know how you'd react when pushed to the brink."

"I'm sorry about your bow. I'll replace it, of course, though it will take me some time-"

"Forget the bow." She ran her fingers through her short black hair, picking out pieces of the weapon. "I've many more. Let's go get some lunch. And after that, there's wood to be chopped and weeds to be obliterated."

Gelebor followed her back to the tower, confused and gladdened.

They continued on in much the same way, laboring and learning together, for days and then weeks. He wondered at some points why Nadene had chosen to employ him; she was superb at nearly every task, moving faster than his eyes could follow and accomplishing more in an hour than he could in a day. That was another oddity: she rarely sent him out alone, after the first time. Whatever droll homestead chore the day presented, she would grumble and complain and stand right beside him and help. The subject of the Khajiit who had asked for her help didn't come up again, nor did they speak of the crippled assassin.

He began to think maybe Nadene Othryn had just been lonely when she'd decided to hire him.

She'd had to have been living here at least two hundred years, if not more, with only guars for company. Gelebor knew all too well the agony of solitude, but for whatever reason his matron had chosen this life voluntarily. *And couldn't the same be said for you*, a chiding voice in his head reminded. *All that was keeping you in the Vale was your faith. You could have left at any time.*

The cart he'd seen by the guar pen on his first day got little use. Nadene grew much of her own food, and obviously had some wealth hidden away judging by her opulent decoration. Only once did she leave the tower in his care, teleporting to Raven Rock in a flash of sparks, but she didn't return for an entire day and with only a few bundles of paper in her arms to show for it. He'd forced himself to resist his curiosity as she'd casually thrown her cloak on the hook by the door and asked how Ur and Alma were getting along. *I don't have the right to pry. Nadene is letting me stay here, in this beautiful place nestled among the wastes. I must never betray her trust.*

Only occasionally did she let her guard down and let him catch a glimpse of the elf behind all the bluster and bristle. These moments were often late at night, when Nadene would take a jug or two to the back porch and watch the sky in silence. This would often coincide with his evening rituals, but every now and then the stars would align and he'd join her.

"The moons are lovely," Gelebor said. She offered him the hefty jug of sujamma, and he refused.

"Oh." Nadene peered into the darkness, head cocked. "I suppose they are."

"You hadn't noticed?" He stretched out his limbs on the chair, comfortably sore from a good day's work. "It's an odd day when I don't find you sitting out here looking up at them."

"I chose this spot for the view," Nadene replied, her voice low. "But not for the moons. Search further into the far darkness. See the ruin of Morrowind standing proudly."

Gelebor obeyed, leaning forward with his elbows on the porch railing. It didn't take him long to discern her meaning. The horizon was glowing faintly, and even so late at night the silhouette of the volcano was visible. Distant clouds of ash shined with an intense heat, cutting through the rest of the sky like a grotesque stalk of poison.

"Red Mountain," Gelebor said. "You said once you've been on Solstheim for two hundred years. Did you witness the eruption?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly, and then took a long drink from the jug. For a long time no words passed between them, and the air was filled with the sound of the night: glowing insects chirping near the treeline, the gentle push of the wind through branches, and in the quieter moments even the snoring of the guars from around the tower. He was beginning to think Nadene had fallen asleep when she finally spoke again.

"I was on Vvardenfell when the mountain exploded." Her voice was one that had been withheld from him, until now; a side of Nadene kept locked away from the world. "I'd been away for a time. Too long. When I first landed on that blasted island, many years before the Red Year, almost every s'wit there loathed me. If you think you were treated badly in Raven Rock...ha. Then I did some things. Some important fucking things, Gelebor!"

He didn't respond, wary of saying the wrong words and bringing her shield back up.

"I can't tell you what I did," Nadene continued, her hands trembling on the arms of her chair. "But I came to Morrowind with nothing. *Nothing*. And when I finally pulled myself up out of the muck, when I finally felt comfortable existing in this doomed world, I gave it all to Vvardenfell. Everything I had. Just to watch it all burn away. First during the Crisis, when Dremora poured

through and destroyed Ald'ruhn. The Imperials abandoned us. My people were praying for me to return as they were cut down. I returned just in time to see the sky explode, and soon after that the Argonians invaded."

"I know what it is to be alone," Gelebor said. "I'm sorry."

She turned her head sharply away from him. "Don't be. Everyone else who cared is dead. We all deserved what happened to Morrowind. I'm a bitter old woman, endling, unworthy of a space in your heart."

He was about to respond, but she held up a shaky hand.

"Leave me." Her voice was tight, unsteady, as if she was on the verge of tears.

Gelebor reluctantly obeyed, quietly returning to the tower and the not-unpleasant warmth of the dim hearth. Nadene hadn't said anything to him, but he hadn't failed to notice the fire was never built up enough to cause him discomfort. Never again did he see it reach the blazing levels of his first days. *There's kindness in this elf, even if she won't admit it.* He laid across the couch, and in the small hours of the night confusing and beautiful dreams haunted his sleep.

The Snow Prince Rises

"From whence he came we did not know, but into the battle he rode, on a brilliant steed of pallid white. Elf we called him, for Elf he was, yet unlike any other of his kind we had ever seen before that day. His spear and armor bore the radiant and terrible glow of unknown magicka, and so adorned this unknown rider seemed more wight than warrior." - The Fall of the Snow Prince

Dear grandmother,

Sorry I haven't written you in a while, but ancestors be praised, something more exciting than a netch race is happening in Stoneforest. One of the outlanders they let dock here, a catman, is marrying Marasa Darvel. Veloth knows she'll be better for it. It's been so depressing buying books ever since her husband fell into that crater. But that's not the exciting part. This catman worships the Divines, and hired a priest of Mara all the way from Skyrim to come perform the ceremony!

I bet you're wondering why I'm writing in Cyrodiilic instead of Dunmeris. Apparently, the list of Mara-worshipping Dunmer willing to travel to Resdayn is awfully short. This priest's name is Erandur, and he's helping with this letter. I know you said I should keep our exchanges kinda secret, but he's taught me so much in the last few weeks. He says I shoulda wrote "Balmora" instead of "Stoneforest", that Khajiit don't like being called catmen, and that no one has called Morrowind "Resdayn" in hundreds of years. I guess it's tough letting go of my family's words. Erandur suggests I write them all down in a book somewhere, so I won't forget. Bah. Who has time for that? Archery practice and sword drills take up most of my time. I want to be ready for the guard trials next season, and the Redoran accept no excuse. If I'm accepted, I'll be the youngest trainee admitted in decades! The trials must be tough if no other nineteen year old has ever passed.

The guards are the only ones who get to leave this boring city without armed escorts surrounding them like a pack of a screaming nix-hounds. As if I've ever seen a nix-hound! With all the blundering and trampling on those pointless trips outside, all the creatures are frightened off before we even know they exist. I want to see Morrowind as my ancestors did, Nadene. As you did! All my stupid friends don't even know what Vvardenfell used to be like. They stroll through the ash wastes on these trips, protected by the guard, ignorant of the history of the ground beneath their feet.

You say I shouldn't get worked up about such things, that everything that mattered is buried under countless layers of ash, but I'm angry just writing these words. You said we should keep these letters short, in case they fall into the wrong hands, but I feel like you're the only person that understands what I'm going through. Most of the Dunmer here now were born after the eruption, and so have no memory of before. No idea of what they lost. The last elf in town that lived in old Balmora is sick in bed, dying of the ashlung that's taken so many of the elders. I used to go listen to his stories, but now he can't speak without pain.

I wish you'd come visit. I know it hurts to see it all again, but the elves here need a reminder of what they lost. They need to know how easily it can all go away, like it did for my ancestors. Or else they'll let their guard down, and Morrowind will burn again. Ugh. I didn't mean for this letter to get all serious. Sorry. But don't worry, I made Erandur leave for this part. I just worry about you, out there alone in the forest. Just know I haven't forgotten you, grandmother, and neither have the Dunmer of Vvardenfell. They haven't forgotten the Nerevarine.

Love,

Habisunilu

"How dare you."

Gelebor looked up from the letter. Nadene was in the doorway, shoulders tensed and eyes burning as red as the lava of Red Mountain.

"I'm sorry-"

"Silence!" Green energy pulsed in her clenched fists, and she threw the gathered power towards him. His limbs stiffened and he collapsed. *Paralysis*. A not entirely unfamiliar sensation; the Falmer of the caves favored poisons that had a similar effect. The rug was warm and cozy against the side of his face. Nadene's footsteps moved towards him, slow and stiff. *I've ruined it all*.

"You betrayed my trust. I never should have let you into my home. But now you know, don't you? Your curiosity is satisfied."

He willed his lips to form words, without success.

"I hope it was worth it." Her voice cracked, or maybe it was his imagination. "I was counting the days, you know. I knew nothing good could last. You came here on the 29th of Last Seed, the 207th year of the Fourth Era. In twenty minutes, it'll be the 30th of Frostfall. Congratulations on your two seasons living with the *Nerevarine*." She said the word like a curse.

Gelebor pleaded with her using his upward facing eye, trying to make her understand what he couldn't communicate in words. He hadn't meant to read her private letter; it had been facing up when he entered the main chamber after feeding the guards. The weather outside had been too cold even for a Snow Elf, so he'd come to start up the hearth. After his eyes had danced across the first words on the paper, his traitorous curiosity had done the rest.

"I should just kill you." She knelt down. To his surprise, she ran a cool gray hand down his stiff face. "You know too much. More than anyone on this island, now, since you read that letter. More than anyone in Tamriel, except the girl who wrote it. But I've learned a lot about you, too. Your honor didn't stop you from spying on me, but I've a feeling you won't be telling anyone else what you discovered."

The paralysis was beginning to wear off. Gelebor shifted an inch and groaned through his teeth.

"Oh, my foolish little endling." She stroked his cheek. "I had thought we were becoming more than matron and servant. Some young and foolish part of me that I thought burned away in Akavir was slowly returning. It's good you chose to betray me, in the end. I needed a reminder of what I could never have again."

"Nade-"

She clapped a hand around his mouth and turned her face away, burying it in the crook of her elbow. Her palm smelled of spice and flowers. When Nadene looked back at him, the inside of her arm was damp. *For me? Oh, Auriel. What a rotten elf I am*.

Her expression was still. Nadene pointed to the door. If he hadn't known better, he'd have missed the telltale tremble at the corners of her lips. But Gelebor had seen Nadene holding back tears before, and knew the signs. He also knew it was time for him to leave. The drumming of harsh snowfall against the windows made him hesitate for only a second. *I've weathered worse, in the Vale. Nadene wouldn't send me out there if she didn't think I'd survive*.

Ha. You've landed yourself on this path by assuming you know more about her than you do. By making assumptions in realms of knowledge you have no business in. Nadene only said she wasn't

going to kill you. She didn't say anything about letting you succumb to the elements.

Putting on a brave face, Gelebor walked to the door without looking back. He made some small attempt to commit the short journey to memory: the immaculately maintained weapons and other trinkets hanging from the walls, the bizarre and haunting paintings of what he now knew to be Vvardenfell; the jars of flowers placed in seemingly random places around the tower, selected for beauty rather than purpose. The fading scent of the snowberry tea he'd been brewing for the evening.

How quickly it can all fall to pieces. My curiosity in an infant's cries lost me the Chantry, and my unwanted attention towards the tears of a friend has lost me yet another home. Will there be a next time? Taking one last breath before the storm, Gelebor found himself doubting that. One elf, even one thousands of years old, could only take so much pain. Seeking out company always seemed to end poorly for him. Perhaps Auriel was sending him a message. *Stand alone, until I call you to join the others.*

Very well, then. Nadene had left the room, or else remained silent as Gelebor opened the doors to the storm. He didn't care to check. Bracing himself against the winds, he stepped out and shut the tower behind him. Fortunately, he'd been coming in from this onslaught when he'd been caught reading the letter, so he was at least somewhat dressed for the elements. Nadene had used her magic to repair the heavy cloak she'd gifted him on his first night. Gelebor drew it tightly across his shoulders and staggered into the snows. The guar pen was empty. One of his last acts had been to let Ur and Alma into the back room to keep them warm and safe. Pausing by the gate, Gelebor shut his eyes for a moment and murmured a prayer for the well-being of all the tower's residents.

Nadene had once mentioned that Raven Rock was to the west of her tower, but he had no intention of returning to a town he had no place in. Instead, he intended to offer himself at the Skaal village. Whatever their feelings towards outsiders, Gelebor was certain they'd be in need of hunters and protectors in this merciless winter. He could live off the land, with their permission, and share everything he found with the villagers. *Or they'll turn me away, and I'll return to the wastes and wander until my feet fail me.*

His movements were stiff and scurrying. The snow didn't overly bother him, but it made navigation a rather pointless exercise. He was certain he was walking north in a straight line, but there was no promise this would lead him to the Skaal anytime soon. The forest swayed and shuddered in time with the wind, blanketing him in showers of wetness and white. *I wonder if Nadene will shed any more tears over me.*

Gelebor was no cynic. He knew they'd both weep over each other, and mourn the beautiful thing they'd been building the last weeks. *A state of bliss we couldn't hope to maintain.* He'd spoken to no others since returning from the forest shrine with Ur's mate. In his role as protector of the Chantry, sometimes decades or centuries passed between the visits of those seeking Auriel's bow, so this was no great drain on him. Lesser elves might resent being stuck with only each other for so long, but something in Nadene's past evidently made her just as grateful for his sole company.

I hope she heeds the advice offered in the letter. He'd thought Nadene to be completely cut off from the world, aside from her rare visits to Raven Rock. *At least she has this "Habisunilu" to spend time with, if she so chooses.* The Dunmer in the letter had called Nadene "grandmother", a title he'd been surprised at before recalling her great age. Sometimes it had been easy to forget how long Nadene had been picking flowers and training guar out at her tower in the middle of nowhere. And then there was the matter of that other title used in the last words of the letter, a title he knew next to nothing about. Skyrim was not a land known for literature, and by the time Gelebor had landed in Raven Rock he'd had little spare gold for books or scrolls. During his stay

with Nadene, he'd taken full advantage of her significant library, but none of the tomes had mentioned the word "Nerevarine."

Best not to concern myself with such things. Obviously she didn't want me to know, and that should be enough. There's little point, now.

His thoughts felt as if they were going in circles, and he suspected his feet were following a similar path. The forest around him now looked too familiar to be very far from the mushroom tower. *Simply wonderful. I can't even navigate without fumbling up.* An anger was rising from the pit of his stomach, and Gelebor made no attempt to quench the rising flames. He was truly furious. Furious at himself, for ruining yet another home in so short a time and ending up alone again. Furious at Nadene, for being so damn oversensitive and neurotic over such an innocent mistake. Had his friendship meant so little to her that the matter of a single letter was enough to banish him forever?

Most of all, he was furious with Auriel. *How could he let this happen to me?* Gelebor stomped through the snow, shoving aside branches and pine cones until he broke through to a clearing. *The shrine.* The great stone pillar was unchanged, but for one detail. The markings of Namira had been freshly applied since his first encounter with the monument months ago. In a circle around the shrine, the snow turned to warm rain. *Disgusting.*

"The Daedra speak to their servants," Gelebor spoke. His eyes turned to the sky, and his mouth set into a thin line. "Am I less worthy than those vile creatures that kneel in service to Namira? Or is your voice too sacred for mortal ears?"

His lord made no reply, and Gelebor's ire swoll to a breaking point.

"Damn you!" He spat on the snow. "I've done everything you asked for thousands of years. My faith was ancient when Tiber Septim first learned to eat solid food. I've been loyal to you as kings and emperors rose and fell. I asked for no reward, and expected none. But you have punished me! Forced me to bear witness the end of my civilization. Forced me to be the last Snow Elf."

The sky was silent.

"A simple sign of your love is all I ask for. A word, or a kind hand on my shoulder. An acknowledgment that all this pain hasn't been for nothing. Even a warm ray of sunshine would suffice."

No response.

"You abandoned Vyrthur." His voice cracked. "One of the last true Falmer in the world, and you left him to be corrupted in the hungry claws of Molag Bal. Why? He just wanted to be cured, to be whole! It would have been so simple for you to forgive him. Now he will burn in Coldharbour until the end of time. Now I stand alone in the world, deprived even of a brother's hug. You are a cruel god. I've granted you far too many second chances. You don't deserve my love, or my faith."

Gelebor fell to his knees, and found words failing him. Slowly, in stutters, he began speaking again in a low voice. In Falmeris. The language was ancient, and he'd not had reason to speak it at length for a long time, but it returned to him like an old friend. Falmeris was a comforting language: cool and soft as the freshly fallen snow, devoid of the harsh sharp turns of the Dwemer dialect or others like it. The words were out of place here, on this island of the Dunmer, but he gradually increased his tone until the feathery syllables filled the clearing. Gelebor screamed and shouted at the sky in the mother tongue of his dead brothers and sisters until the snow stopped falling and silence fell on the coated forest like a blanket thrown over a sleeping child. He continued, shoulders shaking, his

voice hoarse, resolving to keep going until he received a response. When the moons were high in the clear night sky, the last Snow Elf collapsed and fell unconscious in the cold snow.

It's time to wake up, child. Gelebor came to in an instant, watching the woman standing at the foot of his bed. She wore a long flowing robe, and her face seemed warm and welcoming. It was she who had spoken the words of greeting. He was in a wooden dwelling of some sort, but the edges of his perspective were blurred and unfocused. I'm dreaming, he realized. But this is no ordinary dream.

Yes, the woman said. You are more clever than you know, Knight-Paladin Gelebor.

He flinched at the title, looking down. The woman came to his side with silent footsteps and drew his chin up with one tender finger. Do not despair, my child. No one could disparage you for demanding answers, after your long years of service. You deserve so much more than you have been dealt.

Gelebor hesitantly returned her kind smile. She helped him climb out of bed, and led him out of the room. The world outside was green and bountiful, and ocean birds sung happily in the clear blue sky.

It all seemed much too good to be true.

Are you a Daedra, he asked. They stood in the cool sand.

The woman smiled softly. I'm the one who's going to deliver you from darkness, Gelebor. She pointed down the beach to a small hut. He peered at it, straining his eyes, and watched a slender figure come out on to the sunlight.

We speak through a false world, but this is a mirror of reality. The woman pushed gently on his shoulder, urging him towards the hut. All that you see exists. This is true. You can come here, in time, if you follow the path I have set.

Gelebor took slow steps forward, not understanding, but desiring a clearer view of the hut and its inhabitant. Gentle wind pulled at his cloak, as real as anything he had ever felt. The figure that had emerged was a woman with pale skin. A Nord? No. He drew closer, and saw sharp ears on the sides of her head. Gelebor stilled his heart, too used to false hope and disappointment. An Altmer, surely, perhaps an afflicted one. Then the woman knelt down to pick a wrapped bundle up from a blanket. She removed the cloth from whatever she was holding, let it fall to the ground, and held a baby of stark white complexion up into the morning sunlight.

He was close enough to hear her begin to speak, and recognized her words as the ones he had spoken every evening since the priests of the Chantry had taught him. She was praising Auriel. Gelebor reached for her, desperate, and felt the walls of the dream close in around him until he was plunged into darkness.

"Ah, good. You're finally awake. I'm Sanyon. Such an honor to finally meet you."

A thin Altmer with long dirty hair looked down at him. Gelebor dared not move; he felt cool snow underneath, and the wicked shrine dominated the sky above. The wisps of his dream had already faded from memory. *I haven't moved far.* The strange elf wore a long dark robe, and on the torso of the garment a grinning green skull was hazily depicted.

Sanyon nodded towards the forest. "We won't be waiting long. Nimphaneth will be back with your friend soon."

Gelebor began to push himself up off the ground, and a warning flashed through Sanyon's cold deepset eyes.

"Best not, my boy." The promise of magic tingled around the strange elf's hands, and though Sanyon wore no weapon Gelebor knew himself to be in grave danger.

"What do you want with me?"

Sanyon giggled. "What a question. You're to deliver us to salvation, Knight-Paladin Gelebor."

"I don't follow. I've no idea who you people are." Past Sanyon, the runes on the shrine dripped with fresh color, and Gelebor suddenly understood.

"Namira has been coveting your flesh ever since you left the protection of Auri-El. Ours is the lady of revulsion, and what could be more revolting then the last lost child of Akatosh being eaten alive on our feasting table?"

"Oh, dear." Gelebor didn't fear death, but being painfully consumed by a bunch of Daedric cultists was not how he wanted to go. "I hope you don't expect me to cooperate. I'll fall on my sword if it means depriving you of my part of this wicked ritual."

"What sword?" Sanyon smiled. "As soon as Nim returns with the Dunmer, you'll both be paralyzed until the moment of glory. The only sharp objects to fall upon will be our dining forks, and we will welcome your attempts."

"Nadene has nothing to do with me," Gelebor replied, unable to keep a trace of bitterness from his voice. "Leave her out of this."

"Ah, but we've been watching you for weeks. We came for you, but she seems strange and powerful in her own way. At best, Eola will find some arcane use for her in the ritual. At worst, we'll have another course in the promised meal. If she resists, we'll just kill her here and have a pleasant dinner before departure."

"Weeks?" While the cannibal was talking, Gelebor subtly shifted minuscule distances.

"Yes. We painted this shrine with the symbols of Namira, knowing it would attract all sorts of interesting characters. As it happens, we missed your first visit, but the assassin you left behind helped us find your tower in time."

Gelebor cursed himself. *My mercy brings me nothing but pain, once more.* Well, he wouldn't be making that mistake again. "Where is she?" His eyes darted around the clearing, searching for the Morag Tong woman.

"Her assistance was not the willing sort." Sanyon grinned ruefully, like a child caught playing with his father's sword. "She lies beneath you. Well, her bones at the least."

"You are vile creatures." Gelebor had only just noticed that the dirt under him was more disturbed than the rest. "She was injured and alone."

Sanyon scoffed. "She would have killed you in a heartbeat. She said as much in our short time together, before Nim and I grew too hungry to continue the conversation. What were we to do, eat the filthy little forest animals? Disgusting."

His salvation was within reach. *But the final movement will be the most perilous.*

"What do the designs represent, on the shrine?" Gelebor inclined his chin towards the monument.

Sanyon turned away slightly to follow his attention. *Marvelous.*

"Oh, they depict Eola's prophecy. First, the exodus from our old home, Markarth. A fine place for our coven. The Forsworn consumed the attention of the guard while we consumed mostly whoever we wanted. Though our existence grew more difficult each year, with Elisif as High Queen."

Gelebor's hand closed around the metal hilt of a dagger. His memory had not failed him. Either the assassin hadn't returned to retrieve the weapon before being seized by the cultists, or she hadn't found it nestled in the snow. *Whatever your name was, I hope you're at peace now.*

"The next event shown is our landing on Vvardenfell. I wasn't present for that part, seeing as I had to be here to retrieve your precious carcass." Sanyon smiled.

Gelebor returned the smile, and lunged forward to plunge the dagger into his foot.

Sanyon screamed, eyes wide in rage and betrayal, hands instantly burning with magicka. *Not so fast.* Gelebor pulled him to the ground and the spells dissipated in failure. Crawling forward over the thrashing man, Gelebor wrapped his large hands around Sanyon's neck and squeezed hard.

Sanyon's eyes bulged and he clawed at Gelebor's grip, to no avail. Gradually, the color began to fade from his face and the squirming slowed. Tears and blood covered Gelebor's hands. He didn't notice quickly enough how easily Sanyon had given up, and didn't keep track of the other elf's hands no longer fighting at his clenched fists.

An ungodly tear in the fabric of reality opened with a roar. A Frost Atronach rushed forward, moonlight glinting off its surface like sunshine on a glacier, and Gelebor turned just in time to be knocked into the air by a powerful blow. *The mistake of a novice. Always account for the hands of a mage.* He landed near the edge of the clearing. The breath was knocked out of him, and he lay gasping in the snow for several moments. Near the shrine, Sanyon was in a worse state, but the icy giant didn't wait for further commands. The Atronach thundered towards Gelebor.

I've no time to waste. Gelebor scrambled to his feet and plunged into the forest, branches tearing at his worn cloak. The other cannibal, this Nimphaneth, would have a significant head start, and Nadene had no idea what was coming. Her skill with a bow was impressive, and she was a master of Alteration magic, but these cultists were proving to be adversaries of power and cunning. Gelebor could only hope that she chose tonight to be paranoid and wary, and not to sit on the porch drinking and cursing at Red Mountain. Knowing that their encounter put her into such a foul mood, he feared the latter was a certainty.

Time was marching on, the light of the moons shifting on the snow, and Gelebor despaired. The enchanted mace Nadene had gifted him was still sitting by the tower doorway. Though he sensed she wouldn't have objected to him taking it, somehow doing so would have felt wrong. *Every kind inclination seems to bring me further trouble.* Following the path of Auriel, the path of temperance and mercy, had led Gelebor to ruin. *Why should I hold so closely to my heart these values that Auriel himself does not practice? Where was his mercy for Vyrthur? My brother was deprived even of the quick death our brothers and sisters suffered.*

He shook his head quickly, banishing the distractions. Nadene had to be his focus, or she would surely fall.

A hostile scent began to fill the forest, bringing to memory the first Falmer assaults on the Great Chantry. *Smoke and fire. Death and ruin.* Gelebor hastened his pace, shoving down the aching

pain in his legs. Flaming spores fell on him, harmless wisps that vanished quickly but nonetheless sent his heart racing. *Burning mushroom. Oh, Nadene. What have I done?* The only person to bear his presence in thousands of years, and he'd led cannibals to her doorstep.

Finally, Gelebor broke through the trees. And gasped. The cap of Nadene's tower was engulfed in fire, and the stalks and roots running down were quickly catching alight. Chunks of fiery fungi fell to the ground and exploded, showering the clearing in more flaming spores. Although the round front door was swinging madly among the wind and smoke, a harsh squeak of hinges ringing out, there was no sign of Nadene or the cultist sent to abduct her. *They must be fighting somewhere in the tower.* Worry overcame wariness, and Gelebor ripped his cloak off to hold over his face before rushing up the porch stairs and into the inferno.

"Nadene?" He yelled, hopelessly quiet against the flames. Smoke filled the main chamber. Gelebor grabbed his mace and crouched under the poison air, his streaming eyes searching desperately. Although the fire had not yet reached this low on the tower, Nadene's decorations were in disarray. Paintings and relics littered the floor, and furniture was upended or torn apart. *There was an altercation here. Judging by the damage, a particularly violent one. Likely the cause of this disaster.* Gelebor's brow furrowed, and he crept further through the doomed dwelling. Nadene didn't know any Destruction spells. Would he find her charred corpse somewhere upstairs? Knowing the depravity of these cannibals, they'd probably leave Nadene behind rather than eat overdone meat. The thought of such inhumanity lit a flame in his heart to match the ones above, and Gelebor rushed through the tower.

A sound reached him, apart from the burning and falling rubble. He didn't recognize the high-pitched squeaking at first, dismissing it as another door fighting against its hinges, but the cries grew more agitated and his eyes widened. *The guar!* They were still put up in the back room, and he was the one who put them there. His attention focused, and all else fell away. Gelebor sprinted towards the rear of the house, heedless of the smoke filling the air, until he reached the door trapping his small friends inside. The knob didn't respond to his frantic pulling, so Gelebor steeled himself and reared back.

"Back away, guar!" He wasn't certain if the lizards could understand his meaning, but there was no time to find out. Gelebor kicked the door, certainly spraining some of his toes, and the thin portal fell inward with a hollow thud. The roof of the room was burning, and bits of the support pillar were crashing down. One of the flaming columns blocked the rear door. Gelebor grimaced. They'd have to make their way back through the tower and escape through the front. Ur and Alma cowered in the most stable corner, their beady eyes darting frantically.

"Don't worry, little ones." He tried to smile in a reassuring manner. The issue was, these guar weren't little. In the months since Gelebor's arrival, the little lizard beasts had grown to the size of Skyrim's lambs. Nadene had commented last week: *in a month or two, we'll start their mount training.* Well, there was no time like the present. The air was growing hotter by the second, and more smoke was pouring into the room from above.

"This is going to be uncomfortable for all of us." Gelebor coaxed Alma out of the corner, and gently stroked her leathery hide. *How does one convince a guar to be a horse?* He ran through his memories of Skyrim and the stablemasters he'd come across.

"Easy does it, girl." Gelebor lumbered awkwardly on to Alma's back. For once, he was grateful his heavy armor had been destroyed by the werebear. Alma squeaked in confusion, her terrified eyes still searching for an escape from the poison in the air. *An escape you shall have, guar of Solstheim.* He wrapped his arms around Alma's neck and murmured reassurances to her. Too slowly, the guar began to inch towards the open doorway that was their salvation. Gelebor tapped

his boots against her sides, urging her forward. In spurts, Alma increased speed and stumbled through the burning tower. Behind them, Ur mewled in fear and confusion. *Don't worry, brother. I'm coming back for you.*

Whenever Alma came across flaming debris and wanted to turn back, Gelebor willed her onward. In the main chamber, bits of the loft above were beginning to collapse. *Nadene's room. If you lie above us in eternal sleep, know that I treasured your presence more than you can possibly imagine.*

Finally they were through the front door, and Alma hopped gratefully down the porch steps whilst Gelebor struggled to hold on. *I could really use a saddle right about now.* He steered her towards the trees, and secured her to an old trunk far from the flames.

"I'll return soon," he told Alma, jogging away, and took several deep clean breaths of air. The burning tower groaned, now listing to one side. *Nadene's home will collapse in minutes. There's no time to waste.* Gelebor dashed up the porch stairs and hurled himself into the conflagration once again. This time, ignoring the smoke on his way to the back room was a mistake. Hot poison filled his lungs, and he collapsed next to Ur choking and coughing. His eyes burned. The guar sniffed at him and squeaked. *Better to die this way than burn alive, I suppose.* But something in Gelebor helped him rise to his feet. Not faith in Auriel, that was for certain. Perhaps it was the hope that Nadene yet lived, and he could see her once more. Gelebor scrambled weakly on to Ur's back and pointed the guar towards the doorway. Past the opening, the floor was burning and smoke obscured all. The last thing Gelebor felt before falling unconscious was Ur's frightened movement towards certain death.

"Wake up, my pretty little roast." A sickly sweet voice cooed in his ear. Gelebor didn't open his eyes. Firm sinew pressed against his wrists; restraints, likely fastened from the remains of some poor soul. He could smell fire, and hear the nervous mewling of the guar. The rough bark of a tree pressed against his back. *I'm still in Nadene's clearing, and someone who isn't Nadene is whispering to me.* All of this processing took place in a single second, and Gelebor knew all he needed to. He drove his head forward like a boulder down a cliffside.

The woman cried out in indignation, stumbling away from him. He opened his eyes to see a Bosmer wearing the same necromancer robes as Sanyon cradling her bleeding face. *Nimphaneth.* Beyond them, Nadene's tower had fallen. Piles of stone and pulverized mushroom burned in the night like torches of the Deadlands.

"You bastard," she hissed. "Now I'd wish I'd taken my time killing your friend."

"You lie."

The pain in his accusation made her smile. "My poisoned dagger found purchase in the meat of her thigh. Have no doubt, promised one. Though that feisty little firespat will not fill our bellies, she is certainly dead and gone."

Nimphaneth cast her eyes about the clearing, and then stepped forward and drew a long thin blade from a fold of her robes. "Before Sanyon arrives, I believe I'll sample this meat we've all heard so much about. I simply must have a taste."

"What about your ritual?" Fear spread like cold water through Gelebor's veins. "Your master, Eola. Won't she be upset with you?"

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her," Nimphaneth soothed him. She ran the frigid steel down his face, clearing a path through the soot. "I'll just say you were hurt saving your guar. Quite an

admirable quest, by the way. I simply adore animals."

Gelebor tried to headbutt her again, but she dodged out of the way and giggled. His heart beat against his chest as the point of the dagger came to a rest on his upper arm.

"You smell delicious." Nimphaneth smiled, beginning to press the blade forward, and then a glass arrow sprouted from her bicep.

The cannibal screamed and fell, narrowly avoiding another projectile. Gelebor braced himself against the tree trunk and kicked forward with his legs, sending Nimphaneth out into the open. From across the clearing, another arrow soared and embedded itself in her thigh. She cried out, and began dragging herself towards the treeline.

Nadene emerged from the darkness in glass armor that caught the flames of her collapsed tower and gleamed as brightly as the light of his forsaken god. Blood ran down her leg, but her grip on the bow was firm. She nocked another arrow and marched towards the prone cultist. Nadene kicked the groaning elf over and said words only they could hear, and then released the projectile. Nimphaneth died with a whimper.

Wordlessly, Nadene untied Gelebor from the tree.

"There's another one coming," he warned. "Skilled in Conjuratation." *If she wishes to fight, it's her decision. I'll stand by her until the end.*

Nadene bit her lip, beholding the burning ruin of her home. And then her eyes fell to Ur and Alma, sleeping fitfully nearby, and the bruises and burns covering Gelebor's body. Her face went into a stony mask, and she grabbed the rope securing Ur and gently awoke the beast. Gelebor hesitantly seized Alma's leash, wondering if Nadene intended for him to come along. Without speaking, the short Dunmer turned away and began leading Ur through the forest. Seeing no alternative, Gelebor followed with his own guar.

They walked in silence for a time. Eventually, they left behind the scent of smoke and roar of flames. Nadene didn't glance back. Now that the adrenaline had gone, Gelebor's body screamed with new pains. Though only light burns covered his arms and legs, they itched in agony. *I wonder how many in Morrowind felt this torment, on the day Red Mountain exploded. I would not wish it on my worst enemy.*

Nadene led them to a seemingly unremarkable part of the forest. Seeing nothing of note, Gelebor was confused until she began pushing snow away from the ground. Kneeling down on tortured legs, he helped her shove away the frost. Her bleeding leg had to be hurting worse than any of his injuries, and the cold affected him far less.

Eventually, a large trap door was revealed. The wood was ancient and weathered. *This must have been here before even Nadene came to Solstheim.* She reached under her armor to retrieve a rusty key, and with shaking hands attempted to unlock the door. Whatever strength had been keeping her going until now was faltering.

"Let me help," he said softly, and grabbed Nadene's cold hands to steady them. She tensed, face contorted in fury. For a second, Gelebor feared she would send him away again. Then she closed her eyes and let her anger fall, sagging against him.

Together, they unlocked and opened the door. She went down the old steps first, legs wobbling, and a strange illumination lit up the underground dwelling.

"Come down with the guar," she called out roughly. Gelebor obeyed, taking hold of both ropes and descending the steps slightly before closing shut the trap door above them. The air was artificially warm. Golden pipes churned against the walls. *Dwemer technology*. The sight of such apparatus always disquieted him, knowing what the dwarves had done to his people.

He released the guar and they hopped down the steps. Gelebor followed, a bit more hesitantly. *You're being a fool. The Dwemer are gone*. When he reached the bottom, he found only Nadene. The stone chamber was smaller than he thought it would be, and set out in a rather utilitarian fashion. Large chests and bookshelves held countless strange treasures and tomes of unknown language and origin. One humongous cabinet took up an entire side. A large bed sat against the far wall, and Nadene had collapsed on top of it. One of her hands was clasped to her leg, and aetherial energy pulsed like a golden heartbeat.

"Bandages and salves in closest chest," she said without looking up. "Won't have any magicka left for you."

"Thank you." Gelebor found the medicines and applied them carefully to his wounds. By the time he'd finished, the guar were sleeping once more under one of the warmest pipes. He thought Nadene to be in a similar condition, but she sat up after he returned the supplies and shut close the chest.

"Come here," Nadene beckoned, and limped to the massive cabinet. Gelebor followed. *Is she still angry with me? Will I be banished again in the morning, never to see her again?*

She took out her key again and unlocked the cabinet. Inside, countless colorful robes and armors were secured on silver hooks. Gelebor watched as she pushed aside many garments and gowns. Minutes passed as she searched, but he waited patiently. Finally, Nadene's eyes lit up in satisfaction.

"You'll have to lift it out," she said. "My arms aren't up to the task."

Confused but eager to help, Gelebor shifted past her and looked into the cabinet. And his heart soared. *Praise Auriel*. But really, Auriel had nothing to do with this. He pushed away thoughts of his god. Nadene was the one he should be praising.

By the gods, it's so beautiful. The shaking in Gelebor's limbs had little to do with burns and bruises. When he withdrew himself from the cabinet, arms filled, a tear ran down his cheek.

"It's yours by right, really. Found when this island was still part of Skyrim." Nadene glanced away, color in her cheeks. "I have no use for it. Too damned heavy."

Gelebor set the armor of the Snow Prince down, marveling at the gleaming white steel etched with the ancient runes of his people. He couldn't rip his eyes from the lovely craftsmanship and care obvious in every layered centimeter of the ivory chestplate. More tears streamed down his sooty face.

"Nadene?"

She had turned away, in respect or nervousness. "Yes?"

"I haven't wept for my people in centuries. Thank you. I'm sorry about your tower."

"Ah..you're welcome. And it was just a house. Thanks for saving my guar." She watched him for a long moment, and then returned to bed. Gelebor slept next to the armor of his fallen prince, arms cradling one of the few remnants of his race left in Tamriel. *I can never repay Nadene for such a*

gift. He dreamed once again of that vivid beach, of the Snow Elf woman and the pale baby she held in her arms like a treasure never to be taken away, and forgot for a time the troubles plaguing them and the challenges yet to come.

Azura and Auriel

"He was not born a god. His destiny did not lead him to this crime. He chose this path of his own free will. He stole the godhood and murdered the Hortator. Vivec wrote this." - The 36 Lessons

Gelebor woke up alone. Morning sunlight streamed down from the trapdoor, easily overpowering the dimmer illuminations of the Dwemer. He smiled at the sight of the Falmer armor laying beside him, and ran a hand down the chestplate. Then his face fell as he realized his solitude and the memories of yesterday flooded his consciousness. For a moment, Gelebor was certain Nadene had left with her guards, never to see him again. Their debts to each other were certainly paid. Then he heard Ur and Alma wrestling in the grass, and Nadene's sharp voice admonishing them. Gelebor steeled himself and walked groggily up the trapdoor steps.

"Hello," he greeted Nadene. She sat in the grass, legs crossed under her, watching the guards explore their new environment. Her glass armor was nowhere in sight; she wore leather traveling clothes, complete with a heavy cloak.

"We're going to Raven Rock." Her voice was flat, devoid of emotion. She was tracing circles in the snow with her finger. "Might as well hear what that Khajiit has to say. Ask why he wants to meet me."

"I wonder if he's still there. It's been quite a while." In the past weeks, Gelebor had completely forgotten about Kharjo and his message. *Is she really going to pretend nothing happened?* Gelebor sat down beside her, the grass cool and soft. "So you'd like me to come along, then?" A tense air hung between them, the peace as fragile as a butterfly's wings.

She didn't reply, and didn't turn her head. Gelebor dreaded her response, and hated himself for it. *Have I become so pathetic, so desperate for a caring hand? I'm groveling at her feet like a beaten dog. Millennia of blind worship has twisted my mind.*

"I'm sorry I read your letter, but you overreacted." Gelebor willed himself to look at her. "You threw me out into a storm, in the dead of night, defenseless. Those cultists almost got what they came for. Before you say anything else, tell me this: is your pain more important to you than my friendship? More important than my *life*?"

Her fingers tightened into fists. "What happens if the answer is yes?"

"Then we never see each other again. You don't have to worry about any followers of Namira burning down your house, and I don't have to brace myself to freeze to death every time I walk into a room with your mail."

"You have, what, a few bruises? You were hurt worse hunting for a damned guard." Nadene finally looked him in the eyes, her face contorted in fury. "I started growing that tower when there was a fucking Septim on the Ruby Throne. Everything I had was in it. Everything I was. And if I'd never met you, all of it would still be there!"

"They were just things, Nadene!" He stood up, surprised at his own fury. Without the thought of Auriel watching over him, it seemed all too easy to step over his old barriers. "I don't care how old you are. I don't care what a 'Nerevarine' is, or why you're so insanely sensitive about being one. I'm sorry about what happened. I truly am. But answer me, damn you! Tell me you would trade my life to have your tower back." Gelebor turned his back, fingernails digging into his palm. "I think we both know your answer already."

"Fuck you, Gelebor!" A firm hand wrapped around his ankle, and he was too stunned to react before Nadene pulled him to the ground. She stood over him, tears running down her face. "You don't know a blasted thing about me. I saved your worthless life while mine was burning to the ground. After all the time we spent together..."

"I-"

"How dare you. How dare you even ask!" She kicked the ground next to him. "Is that the kind of elf you think I am? Someone who would trade a life for a house? No. You know what? To Oblivion with you, and your absent god."

She stomped back down the stairs and slammed the trap door behind her.

Gelebor stared at the closed door for a long while before lying back down on the grass. Ur and Alma came up to sniff him, squeaking in worry. He paid them no mind. The sky above was darkening in degrees, filling with ash blowing in from Vvardenfell. No blue sky could last long on Solstheim. *The dragon god of time, aspect of the sun, defeated by a gust of wind. The sovereign of the Snow Elves is no stronger than they were. Than I am. I was foolish to ever rely on him. Nadene is the one who saved me from that cultist's blade. Auriel would have watched as I died in agony.*

After an hour or two, he felt the trap door calling to him. *One of us will have to be the first to apologize.* Gelebor rolled to his feet, feeling his years. The guards trailed behind him like children. He knocked on the weathered wood, already certain she'd locked the door.

"Nadene?"

"Go away." Her voice was muffled, and choked with tears, but close. She must've been sitting on one of the steps. "Take the guards with you. I should be alone."

"You don't mean that. I don't..." Gelebor sighed, struggling to find the words. He'd fallen so far into a pit of despair, it was ludicrous to think he could pull someone else out. *I have to make an attempt.* Maybe if he'd tried harder in the Chantry, Vyrthur could have been saved. "I don't think either of us should be alone anymore."

"Being together has only ruined everything."

"Not true. If I hadn't found you, I'd be on Vvardenfell right now." He shuddered. With all that had happened, he'd still not fully processed the intention of the cultists. "These people want to eat me, Nadene. I'm afraid. I need you."

"I can't protect anyone. Ask the City of Necrom how many tombs they had to build in the year 4E 5. Ask them where I was."

"I know where you were," Gelebor said, his heart racing. *This was a risk.* But one he had to take. "You were saving as many as you could. The girl from the letter. Habisuulu. You rescued her, didn't you? Or...her mother and father?"

Nadene was silent for a long time. Gelebor wondered how long he would remain here if she never responded. His old faith was gone, leaving a hole whose edges burned every time he had a thought. But his new faith in Nadene was stronger than he thought it to be. *I fought this fiercely for Auriel, long ago. My reward was silence, and eternal solitude. At least Nadene will let me die in peace if she sends me away.*

"You have a weak grasp of time's passage," Nadene finally spoke. "And abysmal Dunmeris pronunciation. It's Habisunilu. An Ashlander name." She hesitated. "Habi, to me. I saved her

family from the eruption, but her parents weren't yet born. She's the last of them, now."

"I know of the Ashlanders." Gelebor almost clung to the trap door, so happy that she was speaking to him without venom. "One of the priests in Raven Rock used to be one. They worship the old Daedra, yes?"

"Aye. They stayed faithful while the rest of the Dunmer sold themselves to the Tribunal. Three living gods. Featured prominently in the list of deities that have betrayed me."

"Oh?" Nadene's voice had levelled off as she spoke, losing inflection, as if she was teaching a history lesson. But when she spoke of the Tribunal, hatred seeped into her every word.

She chuckled without mirth. "I've just realized. You have no idea who I am, do you? Even after reading that letter. You don't know of the Nerevarine."

"No."

"Wonderful. Well, I suppose you ought to know from me, or you'll just find out some other way. Long ago, there was a Chimer hero named Indoril Nerevar."

"The Chimer. The Dunmer before they were changed, yes?"

"Yes. The Chimer were waging a war against the Nords and the Dwemer. The final battle was at Red Mountain. This was when the dwarves pulled their little vanishing act. They left behind control of an ungodly power, and Nerevar wanted the tools of this power to be destroyed forever. He left Dagoth Ur to guard them while he went to meet with the Tribunal to decide what to do. Vivec, Almalexia, Sotha Sil. His *friends*. They betrayed him, murdered him, and used the stolen power to become gods."

"That's awful. The priest in Raven Rock said they misled your people, but I had no idea."

He heard the bitter smile in her next words. "Nerevar was pretty mad about the whole thing, and apparently so was Azura. Picture an abusive absent mother, showing up too late to save anyone but just in time to get revenge. Nerevar was reincarnated into the Nerevarine, who the Empire found based on some guarshit insane prophecy. Basically, me. I killed Dagoth Ur and stopped him from purging the outlanders from Morrowind. For all the good it did us."

"And the Tribunal?"

She was quiet for a moment. "They're dead too."

Gelebor felt it wasn't wise to pry further. Nadene had just spoken more in ten minutes than she usually did in a week. They were two elves made of glass, tip-toeing around the shattered remnants of the past, and he was in no hurry to send her back into the quiet darkness just to satisfy his own curiosity.

"Gelebor?" Her voice wavered. "You still there?"

"I am."

"I'm-" She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I abandoned you. You had no idea what that letter meant to me. There way no way you could have. I was wrong."

"Thank you, Nadene. I forgive you."

"Really?" She shifted on the stair. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. I...I think we should stay together. I think we're...good for each other, somehow. Perhaps we could just try it out, for a little while longer?" Without meaning to, he turned the sentence into a question.

"Yes. Maybe you're right." He heard the vulnerability in her voice. This was a step into uncertain waters, for the both of them. "So. To Raven Rock, then?"

"That sounds just fine."

She opened the trap door and climbed out. Her eyes were redder than usual. They looked at each other, not smiling, but with a strange new energy hanging between them, swollen with emotion of an unfamiliar sort. Gelebor was pretty sure hope had a lot to do with it.

"Come on, we need to hurry if we want to make it to town before another storm comes."

She produced saddles for the guar, which they loaded with supplies, though Nadene said they were not yet ready to hold riders for extended periods of time. Gelebor carried his new armor on a webbed satchel on his back; he'd have to get it fitted in Raven Rock. The weight was painful, but it was a pain that brought a touch of warmth to his aching heart. Nadene took a ring from one of the chests against the wall and slipped it on her finger before donning her own glass armor and locking the trap door.

They led the burdened beasts through the forest, Nadene slightly ahead with Ur. Following in her footsteps, Gelebor was finding the terrain far more tolerable to pass through. She obviously knew the island well; roots that he failed to notice Nadene avoided easily, and the smoothness with which she navigated the glade was similarly impressive. To Gelebor, all the trees seemed to look much the same. But occasionally Nadene would bring them to a halt so she could take a long look at their surroundings.

In those times, Gelebor suspected she almost forgot he was there, and she let her mask slip away. Nadene would stand motionless, one hand on her hip and the other gently resting on Ur's leathery head. She'd bite her lower lip and peer around, brow furrowed and eyes narrowed in what almost seemed like a challenge. In these moments, Gelebor could almost see the person Nadene had been before. *What could happen to someone, to make them hide themselves away inside like that?* A foolish question. He knew all too well the agonies of solitude, and the pain of betrayal at the hands of one's own god.

"Why come here?" Nadene asked abruptly, their footsteps plodding on the wet ground. As they left the forests behind, the snow had begun to melt.

"I'm following you," Gelebor replied, confused. *Has she changed her mind already?*

"No. Why Solstheim? The air is mostly hot. The Dunmer mostly hate you. Auriel has no followers here."

He'd not yet shared his new disillusionment with her. The change was still too raw, and he feared losing himself if he spoke of it. Gelebor was still working out how to operate without the certainty of faith in his heart; his mind poked and prodded at the wound Auriel's departure had left, and he was not yet sure he wouldn't just collapse into a catatonic state.

"Fine. Don't tell me." Nadene hastened her pace.

"Skyrim was becoming too hostile. Many of the cities turned me away, and in the others I feared to

sleep among the Nords. I considered migrating to Cyrodiil or High Rock. Altmer are common enough in those countries, and from what I hear not overly persecuted. Have you ever had the pleasure?"

She glanced back at him. "Not High Rock. Grew up in Cyrodiil, raised by Imperial parents."

"Like the Dragonborn?"

"*Nothing* like the Dragonborn." The point seemed to matter a lot to her, as she stopped walking and turned to look at him. "I was pulled from the Imperial City's prison when I was seventeen. To you, the time I spent in Cyrodiil was the blink of an eye. Morrowind is my home, not by choice but by fate. That s'wit Jaxius Amaton didn't know a nix hound from a cliff racer."

"I see." Gelebor knew sharing was tough for Nadene. *I feel we're finally starting to make progress with each other. Perhaps that fight did us both some good.* "I thought about leaving Skyrim for a long while. But what if there are other Snow Elves out there? What if one day I walk through the Whiterun market and see another sick Altmer with a hood drawn around his face, wincing at the heat of the braziers? This couldn't happen in High Rock. But I couldn't stay in Skyrim."

"So you came to Solstheim," Nadene said. "The Falmer once lived here, but most of the Nords are gone. Not a horrible plan."

"Yes." Gelebor gently guided Alma over a fallen branch. "It started out that way. Then I ran out of gold rather quickly in Raven Rock, and began acquiring debt instead. After that, there wasn't much choice involved." He sighed. Speaking of such things depressed him. *As if I'll find any Snow Elves in these wastes. Only in my dreams.*

They spoke little the rest of the day, as forest thinned out and snow turned to ash. Soon there were no trees in sight, and they walked exposed in the ash wastes like tiny ants scrambling around on some great dead moon. Gelebor felt as if the gods themselves were staring down and judging him. The color of the world seemed less vivid now, as if the beauty of life had been taken from him. *Is this the price of letting go of my faith?*

I had no other choice. Read this, Auriel: no more chances.

He did his best to still his beating heart, and wiped the sweat from his face. Steam rose from the gray wasteland, giving them at least some cover, but every step further towards the warmth sent Gelebor's skin crawling. Nadene and the guars, on the contrary, seemed to become more comfortable as they walked along. *They were made for this land, or at least what this land has become. I don't belong here at all.*

They stopped to rest in the shadow of a fallen tower. The moons were rising in the sky, glowing almost blood red, and Gelebor fed the guars before falling onto his bedroll. Nadene, to his surprise, set up right next to him. He tossed and turned in the night, unable to fall asleep. The air was too damned hot, and phantoms of the past haunted his thoughts. Eventually, he felt a small hand on his back.

"Nadene?"

"You're keeping me awake with all that blasted fidgeting. Just hold still."

Gelebor felt power tingling in her short fingers, and the heat began to leave him. In a few short minutes, he was pulling his bedroll up just to get warmer. *Miraculous.* "Wonderful. Many thanks. How do you do that?"

"If I told you, it wouldn't work." Nadene ran her fingers down his spine. "Just go to sleep now, endling. Sleep your little elf dreams."

He obeyed, and dreamt again of the strange woman standing at the foot of his bed and her promises of salvation. This time, on the beach, Gelebor watched an entire family of ancient Falmer emerge from their hut to greet the morning sun. They were real. He was so certain of it. *Please. Say something. Tell me where you are!* The woman let him get close enough to hear them breathe before he was pulled back into reality and the unpleasant ashy heat of Solstheim. A spot of coldness pressed into his lower back. He reached back to feel Nadene's hand pressing against him, her ring the source of the disturbance.

"Are you touching my fingers?"

"They were touching me first, miss Othryn."

He felt her rise, laughing softly, and a large animal took her place. Ur fell asleep quickly against his back, snoring.

"Aww." Nadene began to shed her sleeping clothes, the waiting glass armor stacked neatly next to their campfire. Gelebor closed his eyes. "How adorable. They're the best at this age, you know. Not as needy as babies, not as stern as adults."

"Adorable." Gelebor willed himself to think of the drooling guar at his back, instead of the bare elf before him.

"Oh, Gelebor." Nadene chuckled. "We're both far too old for this. You look like a cloud with a rash. Can't two immortals get dressed in front of each other without blushing?"

"Evidently not." Gelebor debated the wisdom of turning to face Ur, considering the guar had no qualms about letting his tongue fall out during slumber. *Time to change the subject.* "I didn't realize you were blessed with eternal life. From Azura?"

"No. I contracted a horrible disease. Corprus. I'll tell you the symptoms one day when we both have empty stomachs. Anyway, the same elf that taught me how to grow mushroom towers helped me find a cure. One of the side effects was immunity to all sickness, including that affliction known as time."

"I'm sorry." Gelebor opened his eyes again to see Nadene fully clad, gently waking up Alma and strapping on their luggage. He lumbered to his feet, already in his traveling clothes, and stretched mightily in the morning sunlight. Nadene watched him out of the corner of her eye.

"Many Dunmer live to my age regardless," Nadene said. "I don't look forward to the centuries, though. The oldest elves I know are either bitter and lonely, or utterly insane. The latter are mostly Telvanni."

Gelebor nodded solemnly, strapping on his mace. *I wonder which category she places me in.* "I suspect you've already lived more life than I have."

"Perhaps once, yes." She rubbed her hands together, looking up at the sky. "I have no purpose. Sometimes now I feel like I'm just existing for the sake of it. Most of the people I knew and loved died during the Red Year. Few would care if I vanished. Habi, probably, but she would get over it in time."

"I would care, Nadene." He took her hand and squeezed it, as he had yesterday. Her fingers were so small and cold, so unlike the fierce woman they belonged to. "I'm alone in this world, as well. Our

people and gods have forgotten us." He felt as if they were walking along a cliffside together, and if one of them wavered they'd both fall. Gelebor certainly knew that if she left him now, his mind and spirit would shatter like a dropped urn.

"Perhaps that's for the best." Nadene shook free of his grip and grabbed Alma's leash. "Grab Ur, and let's go. That Khajiit must be getting damned impatient."

The ash wastes were a decidedly less pleasant place than the forests had been, so their trek was depressing as well as perilous. They stopped abruptly several times, either because Nadene sensed danger ahead or discovered a better path for them to take. Though fortunately the skies were clear of the promise of storms, the steady coastal wind still coated Gelebor in a thin layer of ash. The guards soldiered on, and he tried to find strength in their example.

Before the sun was above them, the thin brown trail of a road greeted them on the distant coast. Gelebor found the sight of the ocean beyond to be strangely reassuring. *It's not as if those waves have ever taken me anywhere I wished to go.* Perhaps it was simply the knowledge that the Betrayed mostly preferred more inland subterranean habitats. He wondered, not for the first time, if his fallen brothers and sisters had any presence on this island of Morrowind. *I dearly hope not.* His sanity was tenuous as it was. Having to see one of those twisted monsters he'd once called kin would push him over the edge.

The road provided Gelebor some small comfort; he was glad to have a modicum of civilization in sight once more. Ur and Alma chirped curiously at the new sensation of elven stone under their feet. But Nadene's reaction gave him pause. She had spoken little since the morning, but fell utterly silent now that they walked a path of purpose. Gelebor frowned at her tensed shoulders and dead-eyed forward stare.

"Is something the matter?" He increased pace to walk alongside her. "You know, beyond our normal parameters?"

"No." Nadene chewed her bottom lip. "Yes. I haven't done...this, for a long time."

"Walked on a road? Evaded cannibals?"

"No, fool. I mean...talking with others, having conversations. Being involved." She rubbed her fingers against her ring, over and over again. "I'm not sure I remember how."

"Remember who you speak to," Gelebor replied, smiling tightly. "At least there are others on this island. On one occasion, I stood alone in the Chantry for a thousand years without seeing another face. I took to conversing with animals, whenever I grew tired of talking to Auriel. The first treasure seeker I encountered afterwards was frightened away by my madness."

"Oh, wow. I didn't even think..." She ran a hand over her face. "Ugh. From now on, I'll try to consider your feelings before I speak." Her words were carefully chosen.

"It's quite alright." He patted her shoulder lightly. "We're both still trying to figure this out. Thank you for making an effort. Go ahead, speak your worries."

She hesitated before responding. "This Khajiit wants something. Something from *me*, specifically. I don't know if he wants the Nerevarine, or Nadene the Forest Witch. If it's the former, he's going to be sorely disappointed."

"I'll be there with you." Gelebor pulled lightly on Ur's leash to keep him from wandering off the road. "And I took a measure of Kharjo on our first meeting. He seemed an amicable enough fellow."

You have nothing to fear."

"You're too naive. I've no idea how you survived this long. We've *everything* to fear, Gelebor."

He grimaced. *She may be right, at that.* The beige stones of the Bulwark, Raven Rock's southernmost barrier, were finally within sight. *I'll be pleased to see Geldis again, at least.* Though Nadene didn't totally relax, she at least stopped looking like an elf walking to her execution. They led the excited guards towards the town as evening arrived, and with their every step the light of Gelebor's forsaken god gradually dimmed until a total darkness consumed Raven Rock and all who walked her streets.

Fire and Faith

Gelebor hesitated before stepping inside. Morning sunlight washed past him to bathe the dimly lit Temple in rays of orange and white. The scent of incense and ash was almost overpowering. He blinked, feeling an intruder. *Whatever I'm looking for, I won't find it here.*

"Hello?" A white-haired Dunmer with a braided beard stepped out of the darkness, holding up a hand to shield his eyes. *Elder Othreloth.* "Who's there?"

"Apologies," Gelebor said. "I've come to the wrong place by mistake. Have a good day."

"Hold on one moment." Othreloth moved closer, recognition dawning in his eyes. "It's been some time, Gelebor. I'd been wondering where our resident priest of Auriel ran off to. Please, come inside. I was just about to have some tea."

"Please, don't trouble yourself." Gelebor stood in the doorway. "I'm sure you have more important matters to attend to."

"Just dusting urns." Othreloth grabbed his arm with surprising strength, and gently pulled him into the Temple. The door shut behind them, and the sunlight vanished with a hollow thud. "I've missed our little talks. Where have you been, my boy?"

"I've been living with someone, out in the wilds."

"Someone?" Othreloth led him past smoking candles and walls of urns.

"Yes. She's my..." Gelebor strained his mind to think of the right word. Nadene certainly didn't pay him to follow her, but her gifts had been beyond value. They could mostly tolerate each other, at this point, which seemed to make him an exception in her view. But the word 'friend' seemed too simple to describe their relationship. "I'm not exactly sure what she is."

"Sounds like an interesting someone." They came to a small room, mostly bare of furnishing, with a small hearth quietly blazing in the center. A kettle hissed on a tray above the coals. Othreloth coaxed Gelebor into a chair and attended to the tea.

"Hmm. Interesting, if nothing else." Gelebor leaned forward, watching the fire spit and pop.

"You like it sweetened, don't you?"

"Yes, please."

"Here you are." Othreloth handed him a steaming cup and took the chair opposite. "Not as good as when Galdrus makes it, of course."

"I was wondering where your apprentice was." Gelebor replied diplomatically. "He was usually quite present during my prior visits."

"I've sent him to Blacklight, to receive further training." Othreloth smiled. "I'm sure you didn't fail to notice his...overenthusiasm, for tithing."

In truth, after the first time Gelebor had come to the Dunmer Temple he had been careful not to return with more than a few coins on his person. Inevitably, all the gold he carried would end up as an offering to the Reclamations. This was made all the more impressive since Galdrus

incessantly mocked and cursed Auriel during his visits.

"But I sense you didn't come here to speak of Galdrus Hlervu," Othreloth said, and sipped his tea. "You seem changed, my son. Did something happen to you, during your adventure with this woman in the woods?"

Gelebor hesitated. Before, their conversations had mostly been academic. The differences between their faiths, for the most part, and the struggles of walking the right path. Othreloth still thought him a particularly pale Altmer, who had a strong devotion to Auriel. But they had never spoken of personal matters.

"Have no fear, Gelebor," Othreloth said, perhaps sensing his reluctance. "Just because we worship Daedra, that doesn't mean dremora will materialize if you dare show weakness. All are safe from judgment within the walls of this temple."

"Thank you, elder." Gelebor leaned back. "I've been turning this problem over in my head these past few days, trying to work through it. Wherever I've found myself doesn't feel much better than where I started. In truth, I've lost my faith. I no longer feel love for Auriel."

"Ah. What prompted this turn? You seemed a most loyal disciple when I last saw you."

"I'm weary of his ambivalence. For many years I've done nothing but praise Auriel, wanting neither recognition nor reward. But the rewards he has seen fit to bestow upon me only prolong this endless cruelty, and in the light of eternal life, his ignorance is all the more agonizing."

If Gelebor's confession shocked Othreloth, the old Dunmer did not show it on his face. He set down his tea cup and pursed his lips.

"Eternal life, you say," Othreloth mused. "Not the most uncommon gift, and perhaps the most shared among the Aedra and Daedra. The latter often use eternity as selfish weapon, to ensure they have a strong and loyal servant on the mortal plane for as long as possible. Do you believe Auriel is prolonging your life with the same intention?"

"I don't know," Gelebor replied. He put down his own cup and rubbed his forehead. "I would say such an act would be out of character, but for all the time I've spent serving Auriel I can't say I know him well. What I've seen of his mercy leaves much to be desired."

"Our faiths are quite different. Servants of the Daedra can ask the Princes their desires, and oftentimes even receive a response. The Reclamations are no exception. Azura spoke to the Nerevarine to guide them on the path of prophecy, and Mephala and Boethiah also communicate with those they deem worthy. Many former followers of the Aedra find this transparency refreshing."

"I see." Gelebor tapped his fingers together nervously. Othreloth laughed at the look on his face.

"Don't worry, son. I'm not trying to convert you. Tell me. How much do you know of the Dunmer faith?"

"Mostly, only what you've told me." *You, and Nadene.* "Your people once worshiped a Tribunal, I know."

"Yes." All the spirit seemed to go out of Othreloth. "We were misled. And as punishment for straying from the right path, the Daedra sent Morrowind back centuries, if not thousands of years. Red Mountain exploded with the fury of our forsaken gods. Even us Ashlanders, who had remained loyal despite the Tribunal's heresy, were not spared the fire and ash that rained from the

sky."

"You truly believe the Daedra caused the Red Year?" Gelebor leaned forward. "That's horrible." He almost continued, but then thought better of it.

Othreloth smiled wearily. "Go on. We both know what you were about to ask."

"How can you worship gods that treat your lives with such disregard?"

"Finally, you have arrived at the crux of Dunmer faith." Othreloth spread his hands. "It's a bargain. We endure pain and hardship in service to merciless masters, in return for rewards that servants of other faiths can only dream of. But such an arrangement means that if the returns for fierce devotion are so great, the reckonings from disloyalty must be all the more severe."

"I don't quite understand."

"No, I don't expect you would. Despite what you say, your spirit is still twisted towards worship of Auriel. But think about what I've said. The disparities between Aedra and Daedra are not so strong as people believe. Have you ever known your god to abandon his followers?"

Gelebor's mind flashed to the burning Chantry, and Vyrthur, left to the eternal torment of Molag Bal.

"Yes," he replied grimly.

"And has he abandoned you?"

The question struck him like a blow. Gelebor looked down at his hands, nearly as whole and unlined as they had been when he left the Chantry five years ago. The rest of his body was in a similar state of health.

"I don't know," Gelebor admitted. "Perhaps I've just been extraordinarily fortunate."

"Ha." Othreloth stood and accepted Gelebor's offered cup. "Consider this, Gelebor; Auriel has no method of communicating his wishes to you, beyond his gifts. If he has given you years of life, maybe he expects you to figure out yourself what to do with them."

"Maybe. But it's not enough." Gelebor followed the elder back out into the central chamber, where midday worshipers were already quietly entering the temple. "For centuries of love and loyalty, I deserve more to go on than 'do it yourself, you lazy elf'."

"There's your mistake. Love is for mortals, son," Othreloth said, guiding him gently towards the door. "The gods have moved past such weaknesses. Pray that you never join them."

"Thank you. Truly." Gelebor offered his hand. Othreloth grabbed it and pulled him into a hug. "You don't know what it's been like, not having anyone to speak with."

"I do. But you're not as alone as you think." Othreloth pulled back and watched him searchingly. "What of this woman you mentioned? Don't you think she would understand?"

Gelebor thought of how Nadene spoke of Azura. "Yes. Perhaps better than most. But I sense she's almost as lost as I am. Piling my troubles on top will do neither of us any good."

"I suspect you're mistaken. But only time will tell. I wish you good fortune with your faith, Gelebor. The doors of this temple will always be open to you."

He thanked the elder again, and departed the temple before any more entering Dunmer could send him rude glares. The sky was blissfully clear, so Gelebor rolled up his cloak and tucked it into his pack. Walking down the temple steps in only cloth pants and a thin shirt, the heat was nearly bearable, and the soreness in his muscles had faded to a distant ache. Three days had passed since their arrival in Raven Rock, and the rest had done them both some good.

Nadene's house was far from the Temple, but she'd asked him to make a stop on his way back. *The docks*. Gelebor was fortunate, and caught the courier alone almost as soon as he stepped out of the depot office.

"Good day. Might you have any letters addressed to-"

"Nadene Othryn?" The courier handed him an envelope. "Ya ask me near every day. This time, I actually got somethin' to offer."

"Many thanks. I have another matter for your attention." Gelebor followed the young Dunmer as he went off down the street a brisk walk. "Could you change the place of residence for miss Othryn to the oldest house in Firemoth Plaza, in the Old Rock district?"

The courier stopped, and Gelebor nearly ran into him.

"Firemoth?" His eyes widened. "Nary a soul lives down that way, muthsera. I've been on this beat a decade. And the oldest house, ya say..."

"Correct." Gelebor patted the boy's back, and clumsily slipped the tightly wrapped coins into his pocket. "And we'd both appreciate your discretion."

"Of course, serjo, of course." The courier grinned. "Discretion is my middle name."

"One more thing, Mr. Discretion. If anyone should inquire as to where these letters are going, please let us know with all possible haste."

The courier nodded and delivered a faltering imitation of an Imperial salute before sprinting off towards the Netch, no doubt in a hurry to catch up on his deliveries. Gelebor watched him go, brow creased. There'd been no sign of black robed Bosmer arriving in the city, according to Geldis Sadri, but that meant nothing. The cultists had watched the tower for weeks before striking the first time. And there were many places in Raven Rock where one could remain hidden. They'd learned that all too well, in their search for Kharjo.

Kharjo had asked to meet Nadene in the Retching Netch, months ago now, and had known she was the Nerevarine. *Tell her that servants of darkness walk once more in the shadow of the mountain. Tell her that she must return where she began. And tell her that she is not forgotten; that the Twin Lamps shine in remembrance, even now.* The first two lines of the message obviously referred to Vvardenfell, but the last part still eluded Gelebor. Mysterious. Even more mystifying was the question as to how Kharjo knew her, given that the lifespan of his race was similar to that of man. Nadene had left Vvardenfell long before the Khajiit had ever been born. *Or so she claims.*

Passing the tavern, Gelebor cast a glance through the open doors and was surprised to see Nadene setting at the counter, engaged in conversation with Geldis. *Hmm. We must have ran out of sujamma at the house.* He stepped inside the Netch, wincing at the wave of noise and movement. Gelebor had not quite acclimated to city life when he'd left Raven Rock in search of Nadene, and the second time around didn't seem to be going much better. She seemed of a similar mind, because once she saw him heading towards the bar she dropped some coins on the counter and pointed towards the door.

"Come on," She said as she passed. "I've gotta lead on Kharjo. Might be a wild guar chase, but who knows?"

"Splendid." Gelebor followed closely. He'd learned Nadene was adept at moving through crowds, small as she was. Walking in her footsteps was not always possible, with his superior height, but it certainly helped matters. "Good tidings from the courier. You've finally got a letter."

Nadene accepted the envelope and slipped it into her pocket.

"You're not going to read it?"

"Nah." She slipped out the Netch doors, nearly running into a couple of Redoran Guard, and went off down the lantern-lit street. "I like to save Habi's letters for when I'm really feeling down."

"Oh." Gelebor supposed if he had someone sending him letters, he'd probably do much the same. "Where are we going?"

"A more forgotten part of the Old Rock district. Geldis said one of his regulars spotted a Khajiit entering one of the broken down warehouses."

"Oh dear. I hope Kharjo's alright."

"If he's looking for my help, he's got to be pretty desperate." Nadene pulled her hood up. Though no one in the city seemed to recognize her face, she never stayed long out in the open before covering up. *Perhaps I should follow her example. My paranoia would certainly be justified, considering there are insane cannibals trying to eat me.*

They didn't speak for a long while, as Nadene led him deeper into the bowels of Raven Rock and the shadows around them grew longer. In a way, Gelebor viewed their time spent together at her tower as a sort of trial period. He was beginning to see that he'd never really met the real Nadene before the night it all burned down, and so their relationship was truly only a week old, if that. But Gelebor knew she shared true face with no one else, save the Ashlander girl who wrote her letters.

Eventually they walked the streets alone, and saw the buildings ahead only by the light of poorly maintained lanterns. Night had fallen on the sleeping city. Not even guards patrolled these ancient parts of Old Rock, for there were no tax-paying citizens or merchants to watch over so far from the docks and other beacons of commerce. The air smelled of filth and dead fish.

"This way." Nadene hesitated. "I think." They came to a warehouse in a state of near ruin. The most stable part of the structure was the door, which Nadene opened with a single finger. She slipped inside as quietly as a sleeping mudcrab, and Gelebor did his best to follow her example.

The interior was shrouded in darkness. Shafts of moonlight came down through the shattered roof and prevented their eyes from adjusting to the gloom.

"Hello?" Gelebor spoke. "Is anyone there?"

There was no response. After a couple of minutes had passed, Nadene let out a frustrated sigh and sat down on a nearby crate. Gelebor joined her, hands clasped on his lap.

"I've been meaning to ask," he said. "How did it come to pass that this Khajiit knows you're the Nerevarine in the first place?"

She shrugged. "The last one of them I knew from Vvardenfell died a century ago. They don't live much longer than Imperials or Nords. Maybe he's as *blessed* as we are."

Gelebor smiled tightly. "Yes. Blessed, for certain."

"Um," said a voice. They both looked up. "I beg your pardon. But did this one hear you speak of the Nerevarine?"

A decrepit Khajiit crept out of the shadows. Though it appeared his fur had once been white, now a thin layer of grime covered all. One of his ears was torn off, and his left eye was milky and clouded. Despite all this, Gelebor recognized the amulet around his neck.

"Kharjo?" He asked hesitantly. It was hard to reconcile his memory of the knight he'd met at the Sixth House shrine with this ruin of a figure. Kharjo seemed to have faded away, like the words of a book left out in the sunlight.

"This elf knows my name." Kharjo looked closely at them with his good eye. "Oh. I apologize. The memories, they come and go. You were the one at the monument, looking to make guar babies. So long ago."

"Scarcely two seasons have passed," Gelebor said. "For you, they appear to have been long ones indeed."

"This island has not been kind." Kharjo smiled sadly. His teeth were chipped. "It's no less than Khajiit deserves."

"I got your message, nonsensical as it was." Nadene asked. "So what do you want from me?"

"You are the Nerevarine?" Kharjo's eyes flickered to Nadene's ring. "By the Mane. Even in such squalor, I am honored. Though if my words made no sense, then you have forgotten more than I feared of your time on Vvardenfell."

The warehouse doors swung open. Mogrul and Slitter entered, accompanied by two other Dunmer of thuglike demeanor. The latter elves carried crossbows, and were currently pointing them in an uncomfortable direction.

"Well, well," Mogrul spoke, sounding all the world like a villain from a children's storybook. "Look who's crawled back to Raven Rock. What was your name? Geldbear?"

"Gelebor."

"And you made a lady friend." Mogrul leered at Nadene, who glared daggers back at him. "A pretty one, too."

"I advise you to step away from my new companions," Kharjo said. "This matter is between Khajiit and Mogrul only."

Mogrul didn't take his eyes off Nadene. "Slitter, take the cat's amulet."

Slitter advanced, and Gelebor could do little but watch with a crossbow aimed at his heart. Kharjo could barely stay on his feet. Slitter punched him in the stomach, and he fell.

"Very brave," Nadene said coolly. "Robbing the unarmed. And bringing four to do it. Were you afraid there was fight left in him?"

"Not robbery, sweetheart." Mogrul accepted the blue amulet from Slitter, and rubbed his thumb over the jewel before sliding it into his pocket. "Debt collection. But now you've put big ideas in my head, and those toys you're carrying look oh so shiny." He nodded, and Slitter drew his dagger.

Nadene tried to hide her ring, too late. Mogrul caught sight of the gleaming clasp himself and stepped forward to grab her. Gelebor reached for his mace, but Slitter's blade was at his neck.

"Ooh," Mogrul crowed, stretching Nadene's arm so the ring caught the moonlight. She hissed in pain and made her free hand into a fist.

"If you put that on, you'll die," she said coldly.

He laughed. "Of course I will, honey." He pulled at the clasp, but it wouldn't budge.

"I'll take it off, f'lah. Just let go of my arm for a minute."

"Nah. Don't think so." He seized her ring finger and pulled, hard.

Nadene cried out. Moon-and-Star fell to the straw floor.

"Nadene!"

Mogrul pushed her away. She retreated, cradling her broken finger. *Is this what it was like, Vyrthur? Did you feel this same hatred brewing, towards Auriel?*

"Hmm. Interesting." Mogrul was examining the ring in his open palm. Moon-and-Star had already expanded to fit its new owner. "Enchanted?"

"Yes." Nadene smiled bitterly. "It brings the wearer unparalleled power." She looked at Gelebor, still at the mercy of Slitter's dagger, and some of the coldness seemed to leave her. "But I wasn't lying. Only I can wear it, fool. You'll fall dead where you stand."

"We'll see about that." Mogrul looked around at them with an ugly smirk. Kharjo groaned in the corner.

"Don't do it!" Nadene pleaded. "It's not meant for you. The magic will respond to me alone."

"Too late, bitch." He caressed the dwarven clasp. "Don't worry. You'll be feeling this ring again soon."

"Please! You're going to die!"

Mogrul slid Moon-and-Star on to his finger, and died. The candle of his life was blown out in an instant. None of them had time to blink before his body fell.

"Told you," Nadene said miserably.

"You blighted witch," Slitter growled, and pushed Gelebor away. He turned, dagger raised. "I'll make you pay."

Gelebor acted without thinking. He stepped forward, grabbed Slitter's head, and twisted it sharply in a direction it was never meant to go. The snap seemed deafening. Slitter fell to the ground next to his master. *I haven't taken a life in years. How easily it all comes back.*

One of the crossbowmen aimed at Gelebor. The other looked down at the ring, which had slipped from Mogrul's cold finger.

"Nerevar, Moon-And-Star," the thug whispered reverently.

"B'vek, Fervnil!" The other one barked. Point your bloody crossbow! I can only cover the n'wah."

"That's...the Nerevarine." Fervnil pointed a trembling finger towards Nadene. "You know the stories! She killed Dagoth Ur, saved Morrowind from the blight. I'm not gonna shoot the fucking Nerevarine, Trilnis!"

"Then you shoot the n'wah." Trilnis adjusted his aim. "I don't give a guar's arse who she is. It's us or them."

"Put that down!" Fervnil pushed away his partner's weapon, accidentally setting it off. The stray bolt embedded itself in the wall near Kharjo's fallen body. Gelebor rushed forward to tackle Trilnis.

They grappled on the floor, twisting, as Fervnil tried to point his weapon at Gelebor. Nadene drew her bow.

"Drop it," she commanded. "There are enough dead fools lying here already."

Fervnil obeyed, and knelt. Trilnis was not so eager to give up. Gelebor pushed him away, both of them covered in cuts and bruises, and the Dunmer yelled in fury.

"Get on the ground." Nadene nocked an arrow.

"To Oblivion with that." Trilnis spat blood and teeth. "I'm going to have fun with you, girl."

Everything happened at once. Kharjo sat up, a wooden shiv held high. Trilnis moved quicker than light, and Nadene's glass arrow loosed. A Redoran Guard burst into the warehouse.

"Dagon's eyes, what's going on here?"

Gelebor turned, and a bonemold armored fist flew towards his face.

He received no Falmer dreams that night. Gelebor awoke in the ashy cell with little warmth in his spirit, and an aching bruise on his cheekbone. Nadene and Kharjo were with him, resting on thin cots, and he soon discovered the reason why. All the other cells were filled with drunks and rabblers, many of them joined together in an effort to fill the Bulwark Jail with a rough performance of "The Dragonborn Comes." Gelebor couldn't decide between laughing and crying, so he resolved to simply lay his head back down and wait for the end.

"Belieevvee, believvee, theee Draggonbborrnnn commess.."

I wonder what Vyrthur would think, to look upon me now.

"I didn't mean for the orc to die, you know." Nadene was quiet, but he heard her clearly through the noise. "I tried to warn the fool."

"I know."

"I don't enjoy killing people. Even scum like him. I did enough of that on Vvardenfell."

"I believe you." He idly twisted one of his cot's loose threads between his fingers.

"Anndddd theeeee leggggendddd yett growwwss..."

"Is your finger alright?" She was holding the injured hand carefully, not letting it brush against the floor.

"It's fine." A lie. He saw a glowing bracelet on her other hand, likely put on by the guards to prevent magicka use. *She can't heal herself.*

Gelebor stood, stretching his sore muscles, and walked over. Nadene glanced up, eyes widening.

"It's really okay."

"No, it's not." He knelt down and took her wounded hand gently. She hissed and pulled away.

"Come, now. I can't make it better if you don't allow me to look."

Nadene reluctantly acquiesced, and Gelebor studied the hurt finger. *Hmm. Stiff and swollen, but no visible bone.*

"Not too severe," he said. "I've had to learn to treat injuries like this myself, guarding the Chantry for so long with no magic skills to speak of."

"I'm going to need a small stick of some sort to make the splint," he mused. "Do you have anything that might do the job?"

She shook her head. "They took everything but my clothes."

"I may be of some assistance, Knight-Paladin," Kharjo said, rolling over to face them. From his pocket he produced a thin wooden stake. "The guards did not care to touch Khajiit for longer than was necessary, and so his meager possessions were protected."

"Many thanks, Kharjo." Gelebor accepted the stake, not correcting Kharjo's use of his title. Evidently the Khajiit had just woken up. "This will do splendidly."

He splinted Nadene's finger. The construction was a bit rustic, he had to admit, but it would work until she could heal herself.

"Thank you," Nadene said, licking her lips. "I wasn't looking forward to the hours of pain."

"Try to keep it elevated," Gelebor advised, and returned to his own cot. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried in vain to think of the beach Falmer, and the kind woman who promised him a world he could never have.

I, Nerevarine

And so Nerevar carved at the grave ghosts until he was out of breath and their Parliament could make no new laws.

He said, 'I am not of the slaves that perish.' - Thirty-Six Sermons of Vivec, Sermon 16

Gelebor was alone. No fair woman stood at the foot of his bed, and the beach vista outside had transformed into a roaring storm of waves and rain. Before, he had always woken at dawn, but there was no way of divining time from this maelstrom. Wind blew open his door and sent sheets and pillows flying. Waves of rain forced their way inside, soaking Gelebor.

What have I done, he asked, fighting his way to the doorway. What's changed? If the fair woman had spoken truly before, this beach existed somewhere in Tamriel. Which meant the Snow Elves living in their beach hut existed as well. Gelebor shielded his face from the onslaught. Every step through the soaking sands was a monumental effort. I'm coming, he yelled, the sound lost.

The silhouette of the hut materialized, miraculously intact. He dared to hope. Gelebor stumbled forwards, arm raised across his eyes. Showers of sand bit at his skin like clouds of tiny insects. He collapsed into the small dwelling. Hello? The hut was empty. Hello! Don't be afraid! The walls began to tip to the side, and a thunderbolt shook the world. When Gelebor looked up again, the roof was gone. Please! Help me!

He rolled out of his cot and landed on the ashy ground, gasping and sweating. In the moments before Gelebor remembered where he was, absolute terror seized him. He shivered and whimpered. *Now I face despair even in my dreams. This world is leaving me precious few options.*

"Kharjo agrees that these beds are uncomfortable," said a voice. "Is the floor much better, Knight-Paladin? I may consider joining you down there."

"Pardon?" Gelebor's mind seemed to race in all directions, leaving him few reserves to interact with the present world.

"Just a small joke. Not a good one, by Khajiit's reckoning. I've had few to practice with. Those who found themselves in my warehouse were usually looking for skooma or easy prey. Not so much laughing with these things."

"Easy prey?" He sat up, rubbing his head. Kharjo was lying on his cot, good eye turned towards Gelebor.

"Yes. There are few predators in this city, with the brave and courageous Redoran Guard watching over us, but those few...well, they do feel the need to spill blood from time to time. And they think, who would miss a dirty old cat? But these elves are not so smart. They look at broken Kharjo and think he will go easily into the dark. But I still have business left to attend to, and dying would prevent this work from being finished. The bag of bones they creep towards was once a fierce warrior of Elsweyr. My little knife claimed four lives before becoming a finger splint for the Nerevarine, Knight-Paladin."

"Oh, dear." Gelebor finally felt together enough to produce somewhat intelligent conversation. Nadene had awoken on her own cot, and watched them quietly. "Would you like it back? I'm sure we could find a replacement."

Kharjo shook his head, his drooping whiskers shaking slightly. "No. I can think of no better fate for

a weapon forged of desperation."

"I'll find you a better weapon," Nadene interjected. "I don't travel with those unable to defend themselves."

"Then you will allow Khajiit to join you?" Kharjo sat up in bed, the most spirited Gelebor had seen him yet.

"First, questions." Glowing red eyes narrowed in the darkness. From the other cells of the Bulwark, only snoring. They were alone, for now. "My identity is privileged information. Who considered you worthy of this privilege?"

"My family has spoken your name with reverence for over two hundred years. Ever since the fall of the Dren Plantation on Vvardenfell, when you fought Orvas Dren in single combat and set free his slaves. You sent my ancestors to the Twin Lamps, who smuggled them into Elsweyr. Into freedom."

Nadene seemed to go somewhere else, eyes drifting away. "I seem to recall stabbing Dren in the back. And I don't remember your family."

"Of course not! We left our slave name behind with our shackles and chains. But we remember you, Nerevarine." Kharjo smiled wearily. "Or at least, Kharjo does."

She crossed her arms. "I'm not in the slave-freeing business anymore, even if there were any left."

"With respect, you have spent too much time on this island. There are still Khajiit and Argonians who live at the beck and call of elven masters, even now. In the distant reaches of Morrowind, where the Empire and your Great Houses dare not tread. But this one did not wait so long in Raven Rock to ask you along on a mission of mercy." He laid back, staring up at the ceiling.

"I'm not an assassin, either."

"And this Khajiit is not seeking an assassination. I want *revenge*. Revenge against those who took everything from me. The wicked, ravenous cultists of Namira."

"Namira?" Gelebor spoke, suddenly focused, shaking away the last wisps of his dream.

"I was not entirely truthful when I said our meeting at the forest shrine was by chance. I was searching for these cultists, but soon enough my supplies ran out and I was forced to return to Raven Rock. Though it seems destiny has brought us together once more."

"I have little faith in the tides of fate."

"Well," Nadene said, after a moment of silence. "I have some bad news. You missed some cultists. The n'wahs tried to eat pasty here and then burned down my tower."

Kharjo clicked his tongue. "Hmm. Frustrating that I was so close, and yet missed the signs."

"How many do you believe there are?" Gelebor asked. "We encountered only two. One, a conjurer, still lives. The other-"

"The other, I sent to the Scuttling Void with a glass arrow in her heart," Nadene interrupted.

Kharjo nodded towards her. "I thank you for this. Though Khajiit knows only the name of their leader, Eola, all of this coven are guilty. All must pay. I suspect the rest have gone to Vvardenfell.

For what reason, this one does not know."

"Might I ask you a question, Kharjo?" Gelebor returned to his cot and sat down on the uncomfortable slats.

Kharjo sighed. The shadows of the cell bars fell across his face, hiding his blind eye and missing ear, and for a second Gelebor saw the knight of his distant memories.

"You wish to know why Kharjo hunts these cultists with such ferocity, at such cost to his own health and sanity."

Nadene watched intently, holding her head up with one hand, and Gelebor mimicked her quiet eagerness.

"I guarded a caravan that traveled throughout Skyrim, selling goods and supplies from all corners of Tamriel. At first, Khajiit felt no love for those he protected. I owed a debt to the caravan master, Ahkari. This was a matter of business, and nothing more. I fought off wolves and trolls, shot arrows at bandits, and laid shivering in my bedroll every night until pure exhaustion forced me into slumber. Life was dull and simple. All was well until Khajiit's foolish heart turned against him."

Several moments passed before Kharjo continued.

"I grew quite fond of one of the merchants. Zaynabi, she was called. When you travel with someone in such a cold and merciless land, you see them for who they truly are. There is nowhere to hide yourself on those nights of quiet desperation and frigid solitude. I saw who Zaynabi was, and wanted more. I believe she felt the same. Or else just took pity on pathetic Khajiit. Whatever the reason, we became closer than I had intended. This...this was unwise. Children are ill suited to caravan life. But when Khajiit held his first kitten under the light of the twin moons...he had thoughts only for the warm bundle in his arms. Perhaps if he had not been so distracted..."

"Kharjo," Nadene said, holding out her hand. "You can't-"

"Quiet, please." Kharjo turned his head away from them. "This is Khajiit's story, and it is not yet finished. Ahkari begged me to stay with the caravan, at least until the warmer months. I wished to return to Elsweyr. To home. We had gold enough for the journey, and I was weary of wandering a land that does not trust or love my kind. But Zaynabi convinced me, and I thought of my enslaved ancestors in Vvardenfell and their hardships.

Surely a season or two in Skyrim is nothing in comparison. So we stayed. Zaynabi and I held our little kitten between us in the night, desperate to keep him warm. The summer never came that year, but before Evening Star my wife was with child once more. After the second kitten's birth, leaving became a more troubling prospect. Even so, life was not so bad. I got to spend every day with my family. Our caravan moved to the warmer corners of Skyrim, going between Whiterun and Markarth."

Sanyon's words came back to Gelebor. *Our old home, Markarth. A fine place for our coven.* He swallowed and continued listening.

"Khajiit's second was a girl. She softened my heart, made me weak and vulnerable. She was only two years old. I could deny her nothing. We were a day's journey out of Markarth, surrounded by craggy cliffs. Gnarled trees hung over us at ugly angles, but a small stream through the rocks provided clear and cold water. Even so, the Reach is a cruel place. A howling wind came down the mountain, sending one of our tents flying and frightening my younglings. I couldn't bear to see my little kitten so afraid. I left the caravan under the guard of Dro'marash while I went to look for

pretty flowers. Dark clouds filled the sky. The moons were *hidden* from us. Do you understand?"

Gelebor shook his head, not daring to speak. Kharjo took a long breath before continuing.

"When I returned to the campsite, I found monsters cloaked in shadow carrying away the massacred remnants of the dead. They cast spells of preservation on the corpses. My spirit burned. I knew nothing but torment, forever and ever. Before I could put this agony into action, the monsters began to eat amidst the ruins of the caravan. Khajiit crept closer, a coldness gripping his heart. When he saw...when he saw Zaynabi's lifeless eyes staring back at him, and heard the cracking of bone and tearing of flesh, all else fell away. Kharjo witnessed all of this, and went somewhere else. For a long time. I am still waiting for him to return."

Gelebor and Nadene exchanged glances of shock and worry.

"Are you okay?" Gelebor asked, regretting the words almost as soon as they left his mouth.

"Are any of us, Knight-Paladin?" Kharjo smiled. "I fancy none in this cell sleep comfortably. But Khajiit pushes down the pain and memories, as he suspects the Nerevarine does. I have done enough crying and cursing. When I rid this world of that coven, the time will come for Kharjo to rejoin his family. Until then, best to get some sleep."

None of them spoke much after that. Gelebor had never had children, but the Chantry had. He strained his memory, recalling their pale little faces, how tiny their skulls had been in the afterwards. *Kharjo is seized by a despair I will never know. My problems seem so little, now.* He peered through the bars of the cell, his mind racing with concerns and regrets, and realized there was a Redoran guard next to the farthest door. He'd previously mistaken the motionless lump for a piece of furniture. The armored elf was slumped in a chair, his bonemold visor hiding any hint of consciousness. Judging by the angle of his head, however, Gelebor was sure the guard was asleep.

An orange lantern was on the table next to him, slowly dying as the minutes marched on. The shadows grew longer. Gelebor stared into the light, thinking of Othreloth's words and Kharjo's story. *Was I put here to help this Khajiit find his revenge? Is that what Auriel wants, what I've been heading towards my entire life?* The possibility seemed unlikely. Whatever else he felt about the sovereign of the Snow Elves, Gelebor was fairly certain vengeance was not something Auriel much cared for. *Or else he'd have had me depopulating Skyrim these past years, one Nord at a time.*

And then there was the matter of his dreams. Gelebor knew they had to be coming from somewhere else; whatever his current traumas, they weren't capable of pushing his mind to conjure such vivid and powerful visions alone. The Aedra and the Daedra both used dreams as a way to communicate visions and prophecies to their followers. *Perhaps Auriel is speaking at last, just in time to hear my final rejection. Or Mara has taken pity on me.* The woman he saw in the dreams certainly resembled that benevolent Divine. But his last dream had been anything but benevolent. He shuddered, recalling his final moments on the beach before the rain and wind had claimed the ruined hut. *Whoever is sending me these images, they certainly have little regard for my failing sanity.*

Rain began to fall outside. Though there were no windows, the downpour was fierce enough to be audible even to the prisoners in their cells. Gelebor was unpleasantly reminded of his dream. The guard near the door awoke with a start, nearly knocking his goblet off the table. He steadied the cup just as the door to the Bulwark opened and a dripping Dunmer in noble clothes entered. The noble didn't pause before heading towards their cell.

"Nadene?" Gelebor shook her shoulder lightly. Her skin seemed warm even through her clothes. "I think someone's come to see you."

"Huh?" Nadene opened her eyes a sliver and glanced towards the approaching elf, and then sat up blinking. "Oh. Alright. You two, keep your mouths shut. I'll handle this."

Gelebor retreated to the shadowed corner to sit on his cot. The noble stopped in front of the bars, hands clasped behind his back. Water dripped and made small wet circles in the ash.

Nadene stood up, her spine as straight as an arrow, and bowed slightly.

"Extraordinary." He raised an eyebrow. "When Captain Veleth told me we had the Nerevarine in the Bulwark, I thought it an unseasonable attempt at humor."

"It seems you have me at a disadvantage," Nadene replied, smiling politely. "You must be Councilor...?"

"*Second* Councilor Adril Arano." He didn't return the smile. "For many decades now. By Azura, Councilor Morvayn had the right of it. You truly have been living out in our wilds for two hundred years, haven't you?"

Though Nadene bristled when Arano said 'our woods', Gelebor doubted anyone else noticed. She seemed to be going through considerable effort to be gracious to the nobleman.

"But I have to make absolutely certain before we speak further. The security of Raven Rock is my top priority, especially with the Councilor away to Blacklight on business." Arano held out his open hand. Moon and Star sat on a piece of velvet cloth, a careful distance from his fingers.

"I'm glad to see my ring wasn't damaged in the fighting." Nadene took a step closer to the bars. "I dearly hope no one else tried to wear it in the interim."

"Our most junior guardsman nearly did so, but fortunately Captain Veleth recognized the signs in time and smacked the fool to a safer range." Judging by how Arano avoided looking at the ring in his palm, he didn't consider himself to be at that distance.

"I'm glad to hear it. Too many have died already." Nadene reached through the bars and picked up the ring with her finger, letting it slide on like a well-tailored glove.

Arano released a breath he seemed to have been holding for a while. "Then it is you. The Nerevarine. Boethiah take me, we've thrown Indoril Nerevar incarnate into a filthy Bulwark cell."

"Yes." Nadene held her ring up to the dim lanternlight, looking closely. "And if you'll just release us, my friends and I will be on our way."

Arano seemed to notice Gelebor and Kharjo. He appeared to dismiss the Khajiit almost immediately, but lingered an unpleasant amount of time on Gelebor.

"Second Councilor?" Nadene let her hand fall to her side, apparently satisfied. "Can we go now?"

"Not quite. As I said, Raven Rock's protection is paramount. It comes before all else. Even before the freedom of one of Morrowind's greatest heroes. And two elves are lying dead in our Temple, where none have died violently for five seasons. No one will miss them, or that wretched orc, but I demand an explanation. Why didn't you tell anyone you were coming here?"

"Come, now. If I'd announced my arrival, one of your guards would surely have spread the knowledge. To his drinking companions, to his wife, it makes no difference. I would have been swarmed by the devout as soon as I stepped foot into the city. Not to mention, there are still those in Morrowind who want my head on a platter. As far as the bodies go, I did my best to avoid the

fatal outcome. Mogrul refused to heed my warnings about the ring's power, and his companions became quite agitated shortly afterwards." Gelebor didn't fail to notice she omitted mention of her previous clandestine visits to Raven Rock.

"Hmm. I can...somewhat sympathize, with your point of view." Arano crossed his arms. "It will be difficult enough to hide your presence, now that the guard know your face. Though it seems they've failed to collect a name. House Redoran's records are a bit conflicted on the subject." He looked at her searchingly.

"Surely you'll allow me to hold on to that last vestige of my privacy, Second Councilor?" Nadene smiled prettily. "It's not that I don't trust you. But if my name becomes common knowledge, my current place of residence will surely follow, and so higher the chance of another...incident."

"Is that a threat?" Arano asked, though there was little heat behind the question.

"A warning. I do hope you're satisfied with my answers, now. I'd heard such wonderful things about Raven Rock, but I was hoping to see more than the inside of the Bulwark."

"Now I know you're toying with me, madam." Arano smiled tightly. "Our records may be incomplete, but my memory is not so fallible. When Lleril Morvayn and I first came to Raven Rock, after his mother passed, the city was a ruined shadow. But it was a city, at that, and one *you* helped build."

"Was it? I must have forgotten." Nadene fanned herself. "It's so dreadfully warm down here, Arano. Do you think we could skip the rest of this conversation and reach the part where we're released?"

"Very well." Arano sighed, and raised a finger. The door guard stumbled forward with a set of jangling keys. He opened the cell door. Nadene slipped through, and Gelebor followed, helping a shaky Kharjo along.

"We'll do our best to avoid further trouble," Nadene promised. She massaged her wrists after the guard removed the magicka-draining irons, and quietly healed her broken finger. "You have my word."

"Yes. Well." Arano rubbed his brow. "I apologize for this unfortunate happening. Could I ask one thing from you, before you go?"

"Yes?"

"In the near future, House Redoran will be holding a formal dinner in collaboration with the East Empire Company, to celebrate the founding of Raven Rock. Councilor Morvayn will have returned by then, and the festivities will take place at his manor. Many elves of note from Blacklight will be attending. It would mean everything to the Councilor and I if you would make an appearance."

"Morvayn doesn't even know I'm here yet." Nadene made a face. "And I don't like to get involved in politics."

"Not politics. Duty, honor, and piety. You were the warrior who fought against the Sixth House and saved Morrowind from utter ruin. And you once held a high place in the ranks of Redoran."

"Bah, fine. I'll think about it."

"That is all I can ask." Arano nodded gravely to them and made his departure.

"That seemed unusually amicable," Gelebor commented. Nadene was collecting her personal items from the large chest near the door.

"Yes. I'll tell you why, later." She strapped on the final part of her glass armor, and looked at her letter from Habisunilu for a moment before putting it into a side pocket. His own pieces of armor, those beautiful remnants of the Snow Prince, were still being refitted at the local blacksmith.

"Where next?" Kharjo stood between them, nearly swaying on his feet. It was the first he'd spoken since revealing his mission. "Khajiit will follow you anywhere, Miss Othryn."

She held up a finger. "First: stop calling me that in public, unless you want us all to end up back in that cell over there. The guards already know what I am. If they learn *who* I am, as well, we're going to be in real trouble. Second, I've no idea. You want to get to Vvardenfell, to kill some cannibals. Wonderful. I don't see why you need me for that. Surely there are boats at the docks that can take you there."

"Nerevarine," Gelebor interrupted. The title felt strange on his tongue. "Look at him. You can't seriously be thinking of sending him to that island alone, knowing what he faces."

"Ugh. I don't know." She rubbed her eyes. "Let's just get out of this wretched place. I'll be able to work through this mess more clearly when I'm not worrying about curious listeners."

The door guard didn't look up at them as they left the Bulwark. Gelebor had little doubt the elf had been listening to their conversation; it was probably the most interesting thing he'd hear today. Nadene was right. They needed to regroup in a more private location before deciding on anything.

The downpour was unrelenting. They stood watching the rain, still protected by the slight overhang of the Bulwark entryway.

"I hope your house is not very far," Kharjo said, looking up glumly.

"Just the other side of the city," Nadene replied. "But don't worry. I've come prepared." She closed her eyes, and moved her fingers in a complex incantation. A shimmering field materialized above them, and it vanished from sight just as quickly. She stepped out into the rain, and the drops seemed to simply vanish around her.

"Come," Nadene beckoned. "You'll have to stay close."

Gelebor and Kharjo didn't hesitate to join hands with her. Her skin was cool and callused compared to his, but Gelebor found that he didn't mind. They walked through the wet streets. Small streams of ash ran down side trenches, racing towards the docks. Only guards were outside in this kind of weather: miserable statues of bonemold armor, standing under awnings where they could and enduring the rain silently where they could not. That was a fair summation of the Dunmer, to Gelebor. A Redoran Guard watching grimly over the outlanders in his city, refusing to budge from his post, while water dripped down his bone helmet like spouts off a decorative fountain.

"I had heard of your powers," Kharjo said, marveling. "But to see them in action is an excitement all its own. Khajiit is in awe."

"It's nothing, really." Nadene said. "Just a variation on your standard water-walking spell." Despite her casual demeanor, Gelebor could tell projecting the magic over all three of them was taking a small toll on her. The lines at the corner of her eyes were tightened in concentration. *She's not so different from the stalwart guard, really. Not so different at all.*

"You said you'd tell me why you treated the Second Councilor with such special regard," Gelebor

reminded her. He had to speak loudly to be heard over the rain.

"Aye." Nadene glanced around, before apparently realizing that no one could eavesdrop on them in such conditions. "Few know who I am. But it's important that I don't piss off those few, in case I should ever need something from them. The Nerevarine must not be forgotten, Gelebor. If they forget me, then they might start forgetting more important things." She looked back over her shoulder, to the horizon. Gelebor looked back himself. Even among the clouds of storm, Red Mountain dominated all.

"You aren't worried about annoying me?" Gelebor asked.

"At first, I didn't think you were important enough to bother." Her concentration wavered for a moment, and a few stray drops passed through the shield. She smiled at him, but there was a nervousness there he'd never noticed before. "Now I know you'll put up with me."

"Quite right."

They didn't speak again before reaching Nadene's house. The dwelling was built in an Imperial style, much like the rest of the buildings in the Old Rock district, but it was one of the few still maintained to a habitable standard. Compared to the Redoran constructions of chitin and clay, the house was not overly large. To Gelebor it seemed a palace. Nadene let the shield collapse and they quickly ran inside. Even so, they were nearly soaked.

"What an honor," Kharjo said, dripping. He looked around at the simple furnishings and the wooden décor, starstruck.

Nadene was leaning forward, hands on her thighs, breathing somewhat heavily. Gelebor moved to help her, but she waved him away.

"I can never repay you for letting me stay here, kind Nerevarine. My Zaynabi would be in shock to see where I stand."

"Please, just Nadene while we're in here," she finally managed to speak. "I like to forget sometimes that I'm the reborn aspect of an ancient Chimer general who was murdered by all his friends."

"Khajiit apologizes." Kharjo took in their collective dishevelment, and the water dripping on the floor, and seemed to make some sort of decision. "He will make himself useful, so as not to be a swamp leech on Miss Othryn's courtesy."

"There's really no need-"

But Kharjo had already grabbed a sponge from a nearby shelf and was down on his knees, mopping up the dirty water. Nadene watched, eyes wide. Gelebor felt a stab of pity for them both.

"Come, Nadene." He gently guided her away, in the direction of her bedroom. "I'll make sure our new friend is well taken care of." For whatever reason, concerning himself with others seemed to distract him from his own problems. *Perhaps that's why Nadene took me in, herself.*

"I'm lost on what our next step should be," she murmured as they walked. "I...I can't go back. I just can't. If the cultists strike at you again, of course I'll help, and I'd even hunt them down on Solstheim if Kharjo asked. But Vvardenfell..."

"We'll worry about that in a little while." Gelebor sat her down on her bed. "For now, we all need a bit of rest. I'm sure we'll think of something later on." Though all they'd had to do in that cell was lie down, he suspected that none of them had truly slept well.

"Maybe." He helped Nadene take off the glass armor and store it in the armoire. When they'd finished, Nadene reached into her pocket and withdrew her letter. She seemed pleased to find it dry, and put it down on the table next to her bed. Gelebor lingered, feeling a bit awkward, and was about to leave when Nadene spoke again.

"After you help Kharjo get cleaned and settled, let the guards inside and return here."

"Pardon?"

"The guest room has only one bed." Nadene didn't look up at him. "Kharjo, even in his dilapidated state, is a large Khajiit. So you'll be sharing this bed. With me. It's just practical."

"Surely I can sleep-"

"On the couch? Don't make me laugh. If you hadn't told me you were a Snow Elf, I'd have thought you the unfortunate offspring of a giant and a frost troll. Your legs will hang off. Besides, it's my bed. In my house. And you're my guest."

"Oh." Gelebor rubbed the back of his neck. "Fine, then. If that's what you wish."

"It most certainly is." Nadene threw off her cloak, and it landed neatly on a wall hook near the armoire. "Now hop to it, endling."

As a young priest, Gelebor had often been assigned to tend to the weak, the old, and the young of the Chantry, so he was no stranger to cleaning others. Kharjo, for the most part, seemed not to care what happened to him. Whether it was lack of pride, lack of shame, or simple apathy, Gelebor could not fathom. Kharjo wordlessly allowed Gelebor to clean his filthy fur and toss away the torn rags he'd been using as clothing. Soon enough, the Khajiit was standing clean and clothed in Nadene's guest room, looking less a faded remnant and more a living being.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Gelebor stood in the doorway with a smile. *I don't need Auriel to know what kind of elf I am. This kindness is all my own.* For a moment, he felt almost whole again.

"You have done quite enough, Knight-Paladin." Kharjo couldn't stop touching the clean cloth wrapped around his body, a curious warmth in his eyes. "More than this Khajiit deserved, certainly. I had forgotten such generosity still existed in the world. Thank you. And please, tell Miss Othryn the same."

"I will."

Ur and Alma were grateful to be let in from their pen, where they had been huddled under the small awning, shivering and wet. Watching them track mud across the dining room, chirping happily, Gelebor did not look forward to the cleaning that would certainly have to take place. But he was glad to see the guards.

Finally, the moment of truth. Gelebor hesitated at the door to Nadene's bedroom, strange new feelings sending shivers through his stomach. *Come, now. I didn't guard the Chantry for centuries from threats small and large just to cower before a door.* He went inside and found Nadene already asleep, one hand fallen on the sealed letter on her chest. He carefully put the envelope back on the table and climbed into bed himself. Gelebor put a careful distance between them, which was easier than he'd thought it'd be. *She has an awfully large bed, for one who lives alone.*

Nadene shifted around, clearly still awake. After a few minutes, he heard her lighting the bedside lantern. There was a rustling of paper.

"Reading your Vvardenfell letter?" He asked.

"Aye." She tossed the envelope aside. "I think I like Kharjo, but his story was fucking depressing."

"That it was."

Gelebor turned his head. Nadene held her letter up to the pale light. She gasped. Drops of dark crimson dotted the parchment, blossoms of nightshade in snow. Hastily scribbled words trailed off into meaningless marks of desperation and pain, and below the passages: a grinning skull of green. The letter slipped from Nadene's hand, drifting to the floor like the last fallen leaf of Frostfall before the winter winds.

The End of Midsummer, Part 1

'In the end, rejoice as a hostage released from drumming torment but that savors his wound.

The drum breaks and you find it to be a nest of hornets,

which is to say:

your sleep is over.' - Sermon Thirty-Two

In the dim torchlight, shadows flickered across the urns of ancestors like the formless wicked spirits that haunted her dreams. Dust choked the air and smothered the small circles of candlelight surrounding them. Habisunilu knelt in the ash and prayed with all her strength.

Erandur watched from the corner, his red eyes glowing in the darkness.

"You didn't have to come with me, ya know," she said.

"Aye," he replied gravelly. "But better me than one of the guards. This is your family's tomb. It should be sacred."

"It's okay for you to feel uncomfortable. Not much of the Aedra here."

A minute passed before he responded. "I wouldn't be so certain of that. Mara's light can touch even the deepest and darkest corners of this world. Love is love, Habi."

"My father used to say there are more important things than love." She glanced at the largest of the urns, and in her mind his mournful harp played. *How dreadful.* "Duty to the tribe. Our family's legacy."

"Maybe for him, that was true. You have to decide for yourself what you care about." He paused for a minute. "Some might say your father was cruel to leave you all this responsibility, at such a young age."

"You sure speak boldly for someone afraid of ghosts," Habi said.

"I do have the most courageous House Redoran hopeful in decades with me, after all."

"I'm not in the Guard *yet*, Erandur. But I still coulda made it out here without you. I don't need protection. One of the last Ashlanders, unable to walk alone in the wastes of Vvardenfell without a watcher...it's shameful." She could almost feel the urns judging her.

"It would be damned hotheaded foolishness to come here alone," Erandur chided. "Even the most seasoned of the Redoran Guard travel in pairs when they go beyond the walls of Balmora."

"It's *different* for me. I'm an Ashlander."

"That didn't seem to prevent that nix hound from attacking us, or provide fair warning of the ash storm that's trapped us in your family's ancestral tomb."

Habi sighed internally. The hound fight had been the most exciting thing to happen in months, but Erandur had scared the beast away before she could get even one good thrust in with her spear. How was she supposed to learn how to survive in the wastes, like her family had for so many centuries, if she couldn't even be trusted to battle a nix hound by herself? Erandur had been good

company in the last months, and his teachings had been invaluable, but sometimes he really grated on her.

"Sooner or later, every Ashlander has to stand alone."

"Says who? Your father?" Erandur came forward to rest a hand on her shoulder. "There's a reason your people lived in tribes. There's power in community. In the love of a brother, a mother, or a friend."

"If you were my friend, you'd know I'm ready to face Vvardenfell by myself. Just as the Nerevarine did."

"You are *not her*. And from what you've told me of your Solstheim correspondent, she would be aghast to hear you speak of her as someone to emulate. Is that what you want to become? A broken and bitter survivor, looking up at Red Mountain, trapped in the past?"

"You don't know anything!" Habi knew she was getting petty, but pushed forward regardless. "You said you'd never been to Morrowind before coming to marry Marasa Darvel and Akh'idzo. An outlander has nothin' to say to me about the Incarnate, or how *I* should live. You're hardly even a real Dunmer."

He sighed. "This mask of unkindness is ill fitting, Habi. Perhaps next time I'll wait outside during your prayers. Being here seems to bring out the worst in you."

"Fine. Do what you want." Habi bowed her head lower, so he couldn't see her eyes. *I feel awful. Is this what it is, being the last Ashlander? Standing in miserable solitude, and pushing away anyone who dares to get close?* She thought of Nadene, alone in the woods, with nothing but beasts and Red Mountain always looming. Sometimes Habi would lay in her bed for hours, anxious and afraid, certain that this time she would receive no reply from Solstheim. No one but her even knew where the Nerevarine lived. She had nightmares about traveling to Nadene's tower, worried about her lack of response, only to find a pair of legs swaying under the loft railing.

"I'm sorry, Erandur. I didn't mean it, what I said. Please...please don't go."

"I know. And I won't. The storm has come to an end. Have you finished?"

"Yes."

"Let's be off, then. I'm sure you want to get some more practice for your trials in today before the sun sets."

She stood on legs shaky and sore from hours of kneeling. Erandur helped steady her, and they climbed the steep stairs, leaving the dead behind them. Before opening the door, they stopped and pulled on their cloth masks and goggles. The aftermath of a Vvardenfell ash storm was dangerous even for Dunmer.

Nadene's eyes watered instantly when they stepped out into the choking dust. The storm had kicked up ash for leagues in every direction, obscuring the horizon and hiding even Red Mountain in clouds of gray. She held out her hand and watched particles drift through her splayed fingers like volcanic snowflakes.

"How are we gonna get back?" Her voice sounded muffled. "Can't see nothin."

"Mara will guide our steps," Erandur replied. "But I cast a tracking spell in Balmora before our departure, just in case she's too busy for us at the moment. Seems we should be heading this way."

They walked eastwards through the ash-choked plains of Vvardenfell like ghosts lost in some boundless, formless afterlife. Without landmarks to guide their passage, time and distance seemed to lose all meaning. Habi felt as if they'd been walking for days, when certainly it couldn't have been more than an hour since they left her family's tomb. *I wonder if this is something you can get used to. Maybe I'll ask Nadene in my next letter.*

"Erandur."

"Yes?"

"Nadene said you used to be able to teleport from town to town on the island, and even create your own recall points if you were skilled enough. You ever seen anything like that?"

"Hmm." Their footsteps crunched in the ash. "The Empire banned levitation and teleportation over a hundred years ago, so it's become a lost art of sorts. The existing travel conduits on Vvardenfell would have been lost during the Red Year. I've never met anyone who knows how to cast the more personal forms. The Telvanni on the eastern coast, perhaps. Or your friend on Solstheim."

"Oh." Habi had some rudimentary talent with magic, but little hope of ever learning anything from the Nerevarine. She'd spent four years on Solstheim from her tenth birthday, back when father had still been alive, but leaving now would mean abandoning all that she'd worked so hard for. And there was little chance of Nadene coming to Vvardenfell.

Habi rubbed ash from her goggles. "B'vek, then. The solution is obvious. We ought to go visit the Telvanni. I'll have some time, after my trials but before the formal training."

"So sure you'll pass, now?" She heard the smile in his voice. "Didn't seem so confident when I first met you."

"I've learned a lot since then. Some of it thanks to you." She'd actually almost given up before Erandur's arrival on the island. Included in the trials was a test of Cyrodilic fluency, a requirement for any competent guardsman because of the outlanders that would someday be commonplace in Balmora. In reality, few foreigners even wanted to come to the city, and those that did were usually scared away by the invasive and lengthy vetting process. In her nineteen years, Habi had only met a handful of outlanders. That didn't mean she considered learning Cyrodilic a waste of time, though. And without Erandur, she'd still be stumbling around in the dark.

"I'll think about it," Erandur said. They came across a steep incline, and he offered his hand. Habi refused and scrambled up the cliff. "I believe we'd need to charter a boat. The journey by land is likely impossible, given the proximity to the mountain."

"I see." She tried to hide the disappointment in her voice. Half the reason she'd wanted to go was to see more of Vvardenfell, particularly the parts few others had ever stumbled upon. If there were any other Ashlanders, they'd be in those choking wastes at the foot of Red Mountain.

A figure materialized out of the ash. He stood beside a massive boulder. Erandur raised his arm, stopping Habi in her tracks, and drew his mace.

"Name yourself, friend." Erandur's gravelly voice seemed so loud in her ear. She wanted to reach for her spear, but something stayed her hand. Perhaps it was the way the chitin-armored figure was watching them. They stood casually, without visible weapons, as if they'd been walking through a garden rather than one of the most ruined landscapes in Tamriel. A passage from one of the training books Habi came back to her: *be wary of the brave elf who carries no sword, for the tombs are filled with guards pierced with blade unseen and spell unwarded.*

"Ho, traveler." The figure raised a hand in greeting. The voice was male, and seemed odd. "You're that priest, ain't ya?"

"Yes." Neither Habi or Erandur were less suspicious now that they knew this elf was from Balmora. *Everyone* on the island were from Balmora or the Telvanni properties; they were the only places ships could dock, and only Redoran and Telvanni captains knew how to navigate the boiling seas of steam and hidden rock. "Strange, to see you walking alone. By Mara, I could have sworn the captain of the guard gave standing orders that none were to leave the city without escort or special permission."

"Huh. Guess I got that permission, then." The elf pointed past them. "Besides, I ain't alone. Brought a friend with me. Banuril Hlavos."

"I know that name," Habi whispered, touching Erandur's shoulder. "He attended classes with me."

"Alright." Erandur didn't take his eyes off the chitin-clad elf. "Go look. But be careful. If you find trouble, scream."

"Okay." Habi drew her spear and vanished into the murky haze. *If I find trouble, I'm going to run it through.* The thought of screaming like a handmaiden seemed beyond her ability. She'd almost rather die. *But, probably better to avoid both.* She counted her steps away from Erandur carefully. Unlike him, Habi had no tracking spell to guide her home. It wasn't long before she heard footsteps.

"Hello?" She called out into the nothingness, her spear at the ready. *I'm no fool. This has to be a trap.* But if someone thought they were going to rob or kidnap the last Ashlander so easily, they were in for a pointy surprise. "Banu?"

To Habi's astonishment, it *was* her old classmate that stumbled forward. Banuril looked a wreck. His noble clothes were filthy and torn, and his short red hair was going up in all directions. He wore no face protection from the elements. In his arms, Banuril carried a wrapped package.

"Habisunilu." Banu looked up at her, eyes hazy. "You shouldn't be out here. Too dangerous."

"What's that you're carrying?"

Banu looked down at the package, as if noticing it for the first time. He slid one hand past the wrapped folds and withdrew a handful of pink meat, dripping with unknowable fluids. Habi was glad her nose was protected by cloth. Her mask also served to hide her disgusted expression as Banu brought the meat to his mouth and noisily ate it, redness running down his chin.

"Hungry?" He offered.

"Um. No thank you." Habi lowered her spear. "By Azura, Banu, what are you doing so far outside the walls? Your mother must be worried sick. And who's that weird f'lah back at the boulder?"

"A friend. Helping me find the path." Banu tapped his forehead. "She came to me, in my dreams. Helped me see."

"See what?"

"Helped me see...what I always knew, I suppose. Or at least suspected. But now I don't have to hold back. It's wonderful!"

"Ah." Habi had a feeling this was some religious ritual she didn't understand. Although she left

offerings for the Good Daedra at the Temple, like any Oblivion-fearing Dunmer would, her worship had always veered more towards her ancestors. "So you're safe, then?"

"Of course." Banu reached for more of his meat. "Sure you don't wanna come?"

"Pretty sure." Erandur's sharp whistle split through the air. "I have to go now. Bye!"

"Farewell!"

Habi sprinted back towards the boulder, her thoughts racing in all directions.

"Is there a problem here?" Another person had joined the chitin wanderer. She wore bonemold, like one of the city guards, but sounded like no elf Habi had ever encountered. Unlike her companion, she was armed with a long silver dagger.

"That is for you to decide." Erandur seemed tense, now. Habi knew that to be certain of victory, they should have at least two and a half times the numbers of their enemy. Now they were evenly matched, or outnumbered if Banu came at them from behind. *No good. No good at all.*

"These folks were just passing by, Liz." The chitin elf said. "Hey. Spear girl. You met Banuril, didn't ya? He seem okay to you?"

"I..." Habi swallowed. "I think so." *Unless you poisoned him, or used some spell on his mind, or...*

But she was in no position to make demands any longer. And the two of them must have known that as well, for they started to walk past Erandur without fear. Habi raised her spear to join with his mace, but the strangers paid them no mind. She watched as they vanished into the ash, their footsteps trailing off like the dying beats of an old clock.

Erandur stared after them for a long while.

"Are you worried about your friend?" He asked, eyes narrowed. What he was really asking was: do you want me to go kill those two and try to save him? But Habi couldn't be certain that the strangers had malevolent intent, and Erandur could get hurt or killed going after them. Besides, Banu was an adult now, just like her. He had to make his own decisions.

"He's not my friend," Habi replied. "And he seemed pretty clear-headed, now that I think about it. I think he's going with them willingly."

"Hmm." Erandur clipped his mace back on his belt. She stowed her spear. "That is all the more disturbing. I'll have to speak with Azarien when we return. He'll want to know about this."

"Azarien, huh?" She tried to keep the excitement from her voice, in light of their bizarre encounter. "I didn't know you were on a first name basis with the captain of the Redoran Guard."

"He's curious about the Aedra," Erandur replied. They resumed their journey east, a bit more cautiously. "We have tea every Middas and Loredas. I could put in a good word for you, if you wished."

"No. I want to beat the trials on my own merits, not because I had a friend who knows Captain Bedas."

"I thought you might say as much." Erandur grinned. "I think you'll make a wonderful guard, Habisunilu. The vagabonds of Vvardenfell have no idea what's coming for them. Your test starts just before midnight, correct? I intend to be your most vocal supporter."

"Yeah. I'm not the only one being tested. Living in Balmora gets awfully boring sometimes, so half the city shows up to these trials. But it's *not* a game of Redguards and Orcs. Vvardenfell Dunmer take these challenges very seriously. So please don't cheer for me, or I might die of embarrassment right there on the field."

"I'll try to contain my excitement. But no promises."

Habi rolled her eyes, but was secretly elated that Erandur would be watching her trial. Father had died only a year ago, and she had few friends who liked her enough to make an appearance. Passing the trials would be a personal victory, of course, and she needed no one else...but having a friend to celebrate with wouldn't hurt.

They continued the trek in silence. Gradually the clouds of ash cleared, and Vvardenfell faded into view around them. Small streams ran down the hills, lightly dusted in struggling grass. A few mushrooms towered over the road, likely planted by the first elves to return after the Red Year. This was where the swampy marshlands of the Bitter Coast had once met the western highlands of the West Gash. Now both regions were mere shadows of their former selves, but every year the Odai River rushed into Balmora higher and more clear of ash, and new and returning flora sprouted up outside the walls. Nadene had said to her once: *ash is a damn good fertilizer*. Habi had even heard talk on the street of rebuilding Seyda Neen, that historic little village where the Nerevarine had made first landing.

Habi had a vision of leading a group of settlers to the old swamp, and guarding over them as they rebuilt what had been lost. Sometimes she closed her eyes and could almost imagine herself standing on the new dock, looking out at the Inner Sea. That'd be some way to welcome Nadene back to Vvardenfell.

Lost in her daydreams, Habi nearly failed to notice how unusually quiet Erandur was being.

"What's wrong?" She asked. The beige stone walls of Balmora were in sight now, coming up around the bend.

"I've been pondering. The woman at the boulder." Erandur scratched his chin. "Her voice. Did it seem very...local, to you?"

"Both of them sounded strange. Maybe they were ill."

"Aye. I've been thinking...I think she was a Nord."

"Impossible. You and Akh'idzo have been the only outlanders to arrive in months. Neither of those strangers were Khajiit, I'm pretty sure, so they had to be Dunmer."

"I spent a long time in Skyrim, Habi." His eyes darkened. "Yes. I know a Nord when I hear one. And the other one, in the chitin, had the scent of death around him."

"I couldn't smell anything." But her instincts had told her to be wary of the strangers, and the Nerevarine had told her always to trust in her gut. "But...I suppose they both seemed a little dangerous. Maybe I should join you and the captain. I could help you figure out what's going on."

"No. You ought to focus on your trials. Let me worry about this nonsense." Erandur raised a hand in greeting. The guard at the gate returned the gesture, and signaled to his counterpart above to raise the portcullis.

"Your trip to the tomb go alright, Habi?" She recognized the voice of Dalvis Renobar. He'd been one of the guards who helped her get through the hard times, after her father died.

"Yup. Ash storms haven't been too bad, lately. Only took us a few minutes to clear away the door."

"Glad to hear it." Dalvis waved them through. "Good luck with your trial!"

Habi's response was lost in the noise of the afternoon market. Though only a few minutes had passed since the ash storm ended, merchants had quickly flocked to the streets to offer their wares. The speed at which a seller could set up their stall after a storm determined their success; her father had been particularly quick, even towards the end. Neither of them paid the hawkers much attention as they passed. Habi was consumed with thoughts of training, their strange encounter already fading from her memory, even as Erandur seemed to grow more troubled.

"Meet you later?" They stopped at the bridge into High Town district.

"Yes." Erandur smiled, though he still seemed distracted. "Before the trials, certainly. You'll be at the manor?"

"Yup." They moved aside to let a few Dunmer pass. "I don't have any spare energy to use on social interaction today, and I practice best in the garden."

"If you say so," Erandur replied, a knowing glint in his eye. Though they didn't argue about much, her chosen isolation in her family's old manor was a sore spot between them. "You're right. You should focus on tonight, and prepare in whatever way is best for you."

"Don't worry about dinner. I don't think I could eat, anyway, and there are some spare guard rations around I snagged from the barracks."

They went their separate ways. Habi watched Erandur go, his burnt orange robes vanishing quickly in the crowds. He was like no priest she'd ever met. The Dunmer in the Balmora Temple were old and decrepit, and shuffled around their shrines like bonewalkers. She was pretty sure they sometimes forget which Tribunal they were meant to be worshiping. Erandur was old, too, but in a different fashion. It had eluded Habi, for a while, who he reminded her of. Then she'd received her monthly letter from Solstheim, and everything fell together. Erandur carried his years on the inside, just like Nadene.

Can't waste time thinking about other people, today. She shook her head to clear her thoughts and continued into High Town. The aroma of freshly planted gold kanet from the community garden filled the air. For a long time, Habi had resented living in the wealthy part of town, considering it an affront to her family's heritage. She'd confronted her father about it, once, about a year before he died. The memory darkened her thoughts.

"Our place here," he'd said, stringing his harp, "was bought with the blood and tears of generations."

"But our ancestors roamed the ashlands with little more than the clothes on their backs." Habi waved her hands at the manor walls. "We don't need four bedrooms, or a kitchen, or harps!"

"What you need, Habisunilu, is a lesson on holding your tongue." Her father looked up. "The Nerevarine didn't save us from the choking ruins of our ancestral lands so that two centuries later some ungrateful wench could bay about how easy her life is."

"I'm sorry." She looked down at her shoes. Her father rose to his feet, harp string twisted between his fingers. "I didn't mean it."

Habi nearly ran into a guard, and the memory was banished.

"Excuse me," she said, and was surprised to see Captain Bedas looking down at her. "Oh, Mephala. I'm so sorry!"

"You're fine, girl." Bedas grinned. "A bit distracted, are you? Worried about tonight?"

"Um, yeah." Habi swallowed. She'd only spoken to the Captain a handful of times, and her nerves always got the best of her. "Err, my priest friend wanted to talk to you..."

"Erandur? Aye, we're having tea together in..." Bedas glanced at the sky. "B'vek. I'm late. I have to be going, applicant Habisunilu. Best prepare for your trials."

She watched him go, a dangerous seed of curiosity growing in her. *Maybe I'll go pay Erandur a visit after I practice, and see what Bedas thinks about what happened.* A good portion of the trials tonight would be scenario-based, and getting inside the mind of a veteran guardsman certainly wouldn't hurt her chances. And all the better if she could learn more about the strangers they'd encountered. Habi walked slowly up the steps to the manor, brow furrowed in thought.

Habi crouched low, her sore legs aching in protest.

"What you've told me, Erandur..." Bedas sighed. "You mustn't tell another soul. The truth is, the Hlavos boy isn't the first to go missing in this way. We've had almost a dozen elves leave the city since Last Seed."

"Abducted?"

"No. Otherwise, there'd be a crowd of people outside my office demanding answers. All these Dunmer made arrangements. The ones with families asked their kin not to report them missing. They slipped out between guard shifts, often at night."

"The more I learn about this, the less I like it." Habi heard Erandur sit down. "There's nothing out there in the wastes but certain death. What are these elves hoping to find? The Telvanni?"

"I sent the magelords a missive after we figured out what was happening. To my surprise, they actually responded, and said a few of their people had vanished as well. One of them was even a noble. Left his tower behind and everything."

"Have they had any luck searching?"

Bedas laughed, coming closer to the door. Habi held her breath and moved away slightly, looking down the hallway to make sure no one was coming.

"No harm meant, Erandur, but only an outlander would ask that question. Let me put in a way someone from Skyrim would understand: the Telvanni are a lot like the dragons. They don't usually bother one another, might even help each other out, every once in a while. But when a dragon's friend goes missing, he doesn't call his local guardsmen. He moves in on his friend's territory, and praises his own cunning."

"I think I understand," Erandur replied after a moment's hesitation. "So the Telvanni assume their missing are dead, or off conducting some personal experiments. Either way, they don't care. I dearly hope things are different here in Balmora. Have any of our dozen been found?"

"Two. One, a guard patrol discovered dead not far from town. Seems she was caught out in an ash storm. Another one we caught trying to steal supplies from the guard barracks. A fisherman from Labor District, had lived in Balmora his whole life. 'Twas from him we learned all we know."

"Was?"

"S'wit hung himself in his cell with his own pants. Never seen anything like it."

"Mara's mercy," Erandur said. "Surely there must be some dark forces at work here."

"Maybe so. The fisherman told us that a woman came to him in his dreams, told him his true purpose in life. He told us he'd been waiting all his life for someone like her."

"Dreams?" Erandur must have stood up quickly, because his chair shrieked loud enough to make her wince. "Tell me, Azarien. This is absolutely essential. Did the fisherman speak of dreams, or nightmares? I must know his exact words."

There was a pause before Captain Bedas' response. Perhaps he was as taken aback as Habi was, to hear the usually mild-mannered priest speak with such force.

"Dreams, he said. Spoke of them fondly, even when we had him thrown in a cell." She heard Bedas step forwards. "But know this, Erandur. I know we're friends, of sorts. But you don't know the history of Vvardenfell. If the Dunmer around here start hearing talk of dreamers, of people going missing in the night...there *will* be a panic. Riots, fights, chaos like you'd never imagine. There are still families here who lost cherished ones to the Sixth House."

"The Sixth House?" Erandur sounded as surprised as she felt.

"Aye. I've been reading over the reports of the guard captain back then. Say what you will about the Hlaalu, they're damn good record keepers. So far, there haven't been any shrines popping up in the dark corners of the city. And our fisherman didn't speak of dreamers or sleepers. But the first time I hear the name Dagoth Ur spoken on the streets of Balmora...I'm putting all of us on a ship off this island."

Habi shuddered. *I need to tell Nadene about this.* She was still writing her next letter, fortunately. It would go out with the rest of the city's mail in a few days.

"You have my word. Our conversation will never leave this room."

"Thank you. I don't usually care to swear over tea, but desperate times, eh? I'd better be getting back to it, now. Have some preparations I have to make for the trials. We'll speak more of this, tomorrow. Decide on the best course of action."

"Of course. Wonderful tea, as always, captain."

Habi scrambled to her feet, and made it around the corner just as the captain's door opened. She brushed off her pants and turned around just in time to greet Erandur.

"Good evening, Habi."

"Hi, Erandur. Fancy meeting you, here."

"Didn't you come here for just that purpose?" They walked down the corridor, passing the barracks. Through the open door, guards were strapping on bonemold plate and laughing. "Unless you planned to speak with the captain before your trials."

"Uh, no. Definitely came for you." Habi cursed herself. *How can I outwit hardened criminals if I can't even deceive a priest of Mara?* But Erandur still seemed distracted from his conversation with Bedas. "Woof, my arms are sore. I did so many spear drills I've got them down to an instinct."

"Truly?"

"If you handed me a mop right now, I'd sent it flying over the river without a thought."

Erandur chuckled. They left the guardhouse behind them. The blazing orange light of sunset peeked past Red Mountain on the horizon. Oftentimes, the ash from the volcano would obscure such a sight. She was glad to see the gods had made an exception for such an important day.

"You seem nervous," Erandur said. They came to a bench looking over the river, and he beckoned her to sit. A plaque set into the polished wood read: *In Memory of Nerevar, who Led us Twice from Flame and Ruin*. They were alone on the streets. Everyone else was preparing for the trials, or preparing to go watch the festivities. She was already in her training armor.

Habi bit her lip. She wanted so badly to ask him about what she'd overheard. *No time for that, now. You can solve crimes when you've actually passed the trials*. "I don't know what I'd do if I fail. Walk off into the wastes, probably. Become a mabrigash. Lure men into my camp, and steal their vital essences." Her good mood faded as she watched the waters of the Odai drift past. "Die alone, like the rest of the Ashlanders." *Like father did*.

"Don't despair." Erandur squeezed her shoulder. "Remember your name, Habi. I haven't learned Velothi half as well as you've done Cyrodiilic, but I know enough to be certain you aren't alone."

"Habisunilu," she said wistfully. "Habi, watched over by the ancestors."

"That's right. They'll all be watching you this night, and whatever the outcome, they will still love you when the sun rises. As will I."

"Oh." Habi leaned against him, her eyes stinging. "Erandur. What I said to you in the tomb, about not being a real Dunmer...I'm so sorry..."

"You have nothing to apologize for." He pulled out a cloth and gently wiped her face.

"My father was...I always talk about him like he was some great elf, but..."

"Hush. It's alright." Erandur held her tighter. "If you ever want to leave that empty manor behind, you'll always have a place beside me. Though I must warn you, I often sleep on the ground."

Habi giggled, and sniffed. "I wish...I wish she was here. Just for tonight. Even for just a few minutes."

"Perhaps we can visit Solstheim after your trials, instead of the Telvanni. I hear they're rather cranky, anyway."

"Yes. I'd like that."

They watched the sun fall behind Red Mountain, lighting up the volcano's silhouette in shades of crimson and amber. For a few minutes Habi forgot about the tests a few short hours away that would decide her fate, and about the disturbing happenings Erandur and the captain had discussed. For a few minutes, she just wondered if Nadene was watching the same sunset, half a world away.

The End of Midsummer, Part 2

Going to be out of town tomorrow, so posting this one a bit early. Please review if you continue to enjoy!

You can hear the words, so run away

Come Hortator, unfold into a clear unknown,

Stay quiet until you've slept in the yesterday,

And say no elegies for the melting stone.' - 36 Lessons of Vivec, Sermon 5

Moonlight spilled across the field and on to the bonemold armored guards and other citizenry that'd come to watch the annual trials. Masser and Secunda were so bright in the sky that the logistics officer determined no lanterns would be necessary. *Any trainee worth his heart stones can see in the dark anyway*, Habi thought. Evidently, that didn't include their drunken instructors. After seeing Erandur to one of the viewing stands and bidding him farewell, she'd dodged no less than three of her stumbling teachers trying to wish her good luck, the scent of strong greef and mazte filling the air like a miasma.

She spotted a huge vessel of spirit around which many figures were gathered, occasionally sliding the top away from the vessel and refilling their cups. Habi was surprised to see a few prominent locals standing around, like the outlander Khajiit Akh'idzo and his new Dunmer bride, as well as a host of commoners. The stands were full to bursting of elves drinking and laughing. Habi knew how popular the trials usually were, of course, having attended in years past, but the crowd seemed so much larger now that she would be one of the performers. Erandur was a immobile orange blur among the rowdy masses, sitting quietly and looking towards her. His undivided attention helped stave her rising panic. Somewhat.

"Habi!" A Dunmer waved at her from beside a few pack guars, and came towards her. *Ugh. Gothmis Orenos*. "Hey, sweet thing. Where ya going?"

"The same place you ought to be headin', scrib brain." Habi ignored his pawing at her shoulder, and tried to withstand his boozy breath. "An applicant shouldn't be drinking on the night of his trial. You're gonna fall down on the field and embarrass yourself."

"Whatever. Maybe I'll get a few laughs." She felt Gothmis watching as she walked away. "Azura knows this night needs some humor, with a tight-ass like you competing."

Habi didn't respond. *S'wit*. At least with Gothmis on the field, she couldn't be the worse showing.

A few guards forbidden from drink and none too happy about it were guarding the boundaries of the inner field, where the training equipment had been set up. She found the captain's tent nearby, joined by a few other temporary structures that smelled of alcohol and delicious food. Habi's stomach growled, but she quite sternly told it to just knock it off for a few hours. *After I pass the trials, we can devour that entire meal tent, okay?*

"Applicant Habisunilu," Captain Bedas greeted her, when she pushed open the tent flap and stepped inside. He sat at a large bogwood desk, a cup and a burning candle in front of him. Judging by the clearness of his eyes, he'd not overly indulged. "Welcome to your trials. I always suspected you would end up with us, even when you were a little netch calf trying to beat up older boys."

"Um. Thanks?" Habi had no idea Bedas had noticed her back then, when he'd only been a sergeant himself. She was fairly certain one of the lads she'd gone after was his son. Habi steeled herself. "I've been lookin' forward to this day for years. I...thank you, captain, for letting me try." Normally, the minimum age for a guardsman was twenty, but she'd convinced the captain to let her try out a year early based on her class scores and physical prowess. There were women in the guard, of course, but they were few and far between. *So I have all the more to prove.*

"Of course. You've earned your place here, today. No charity has taken place; this isn't the temple. If you succeed, it will be because you deserved to. But there will be no shame in failure, either." Bedas leaned forward, his gaze piercing through the wisps of candle smoke. "These trials are designed to punish the body and destroy the mind. We can accept only Dunmer of great endurance and cunning into the Redoran Guard. That goes doubly on this island. Anything less would compromise the safety of every man, woman, and child in Balmora. We're their only line of defense against the dangers of Vvardenfell. If you show weakness tonight, the trial conductors will not hesitate to tear you apart and lay your failures bare for all to see. Are you still sure you wish to proceed?"

"I'm absolutely certain." She met his eyes without blinking. The tests had already begun, and this was one of the first. "I *will* join your ranks, Captain Bedas."

Bedas laughed. "And when you do, I'll be glad to share a drink with our youngest recruit in decades."

Habi smiled weakly, some of the tension draining out of her. "Sounds like a plan. When is my test?"

"Let me check..." He pushed aside his cup and picked up a scroll, and held it up to the candlelight. "There are seven applicants, including yourself. All the others either failed to pass the written tests or withdrew their applications before tonight. You'll be the last to try out."

Aw, b'vek. She'd really hoped to be first. There was no advantage in going last, as each trial was personalized to the applicant, and Habi knew watching the others pass or fail before her would only stoke the growing flames of nervous panic. Not to mention that the night's celebrations would end with her success or failure, and that all who attended would leave with her performance on their minds. *But there's nothing for it. Nadene always said that nothing worth doing is easy. And it's not like I have to fight Dagoth Ur or contract corpus.* Habi nodded firmly and left the captain to his duties. Outside the tent, the night had become surprisingly chilly. She shivered and headed back towards the stands. At least she'd get to watch the other trials with Erandur.

As Habi passed by the drinks tent, a strange odor stopped her in her tracks. A distant memory came back to her, of walking through Nadene's garden in Solstheim. *Strange. None of the herbs she grows would survive on Vvardenfell. Maybe someone's imported some special plants for the occasion.* But the scent she thought she recognized had no place in a drinking tent. Habi hovered for a second, her mind racing. She poked at the intrusion in her mind, demanding answers, but nothing was coming to light. *Just my nerves getting to me.* A blaring sound rang across the field, heralding the first trial. Erandur would be getting worried.

"That's probably enough," a male voice said, and her blood ran cold. Erandur had said earlier he knew the voice of a Nord when he heard one. Habi couldn't claim the same, but she almost certainly knew the voice of a Dunmer, and whoever was in that tent was no elf. *But is almost certain enough to jeopardize all you've been working towards?* If she went and sent Captain Bedas charging in to arrest an innocent vendor, they'd never let her join the guard. *I have to be sure. Just a peek, then I'll find the nearest officer.*

Habi crouched low to the ground. There was no one else around; Bedas himself had left his tent and was jogging towards the field, not too far away. She watched him go, indecision gripping her heart. *One shout is all it would take.* But she let Bedas leave. *Ancestors, watch over me.* Habi crept forward, the grass soft under her feet, and pushed aside the tent flap.

The chitin-clad stranger from earlier was standing over a large drinking vessel, a potion bottle in his hand. His back was to her. The air smelled of spirits and the sharp cloying odor that Habi had recognized. *A poison of some sort, no doubt.* The stranger delicately poured the potion into the mazte. Then he picked up a spoon and began stirring.

Okay. It's him. What now?

The choice was taken from her, as the stranger glanced back and saw her crouching at the threshold.

"Oh!" He said, with a start. "You scared the shit out of me, girl. What in Oblivion are you doing here?"

"I'd ask you the same." Habi stood and crossed her arms, mostly to hide her shaking hands. "What's that stuff you just poured in there?"

"Um...special order from the captain," he replied. "A little extra kick, for all the good work you folks have been doing."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." He cocked his head. "Hey, I know you from somewhere, don't I?"

"Um." Habi moved backwards, ever so slightly. "I don't think so."

"Aw, that's right. You're that bitch that caught me and Lisbet moving one of the new ones out of town."

"Lisbet?" That was no Dunmer name she'd ever heard of. Habi felt the canvas yielding against her back. *Time to get out of here.*

But a strong hand pushed back, sending her sprawling forward to land at the stranger's feet. Habi rolled over, eyes wide, and watched the tent flap open by itself and stay that way for almost a minute. Invisible figures entered the tent. The indentation of their footsteps in the passed by her head on the rug. When Habi looked up at the stranger again, he'd taken his helmet off.

"You're..." She swallowed. "You're not Dunmer."

The greasy Breton grinned down at her. "Nah. Name's Banning. You're in for a world of hurt, honey. I hope I get a piece."

Habi suddenly remembered her spear, and scrambled to her feet. She pulled the weapon off her back and held the trembling tip at Banning's throat, mindful of the invisible bodies pressing in on them. There were distant cheers. The first applicant was probably on the field.

"Oh, oh oh." Banning raised his hands. "Little greyskin's got some fire in her."

"What are you doing? That liquid you added to the mazte..." She pushed the spear forward a little, drawing his chin up. "Was that poison?" Her heart beat against her chest so fiercely she swore she could hear it.

"Poison?" A woman's voice, as smooth as a stone in a fierce river. "Oh, no. No more than usual, anyway. We wouldn't want to contaminate our food supply." A canvas bag on a nearby table fell, and many empty bottles rolled across the floor. "Our brother has been adding our special ingredient to your drinks for hours and hours. If it were poison, half the crowd out there would be lying dead."

"What, then? What've you done?" Habi's eyes searched the empty air, frantic. *If I keep my spear at the Breton's neck, they won't dare to hurt me.*

The woman giggled. "Just a little something to, mmm, excite the passions of all your friends out there. I've been working on this formula for years. It was originally meant for another city."

"A real shame, too," Banning grumbled. "I was really lookin' forward to watching all those Silver-Blood parasites kill each other. Would have been a lot more falling."

Eola continued, "When the body is at rest, the effects are indistinguishable from intoxication. The fun begins when you add adrenaline into the mix. Imagine the strongest fury potion you've ever beheld."

The distant cheers had turned into screams. *Oh, no.* Her mind flashed to Gothmis. *If he was the first on the field...*

Strong arms gripped Habi, and her spear clattered to the floor. She struggled and squirmed, to no avail. Figures faded into view around her as their invisibility faded. Mostly Dunmer. Some of the faces, she knew. A red-headed Breton woman stepped forward so her face was an inch away. Habi saw the empty pit where one of her eyes should've been, and gasped.

"Hush, hush." Eola brought her hand back and slapped Habi hard enough to render her body limp. "Brother Banuril, take her to see what's become of her little town."

"Banu?" She asked hazily.

"That's right, Habi." Her old classmate squeezed tight enough to push the air from her body, and carried her just outside the tent.

Screams and yells of pain and fury filled the air. Fire was rising from the trials field. Commoners ran at guards with daggers and pitchforks, and the guards cut them down without mercy. Elves she'd known for years were tearing each other apart, tooth and nail. One Dunmer began to flee, until his steps faltered and he turned back around to join the bloodbath. Only a precious few, mostly Temple priests and mothers, seemed to be spared the poisoning, but they could not outrun the afflicted.

"Melsele, please!" Bedas, on his knees, pleaded with his wife. He'd put his greatsword on the ground. She rushed forward with a screech, the steel of her dagger flashing in the moonlight, and began stabbing him over and over. The Captain offered no resistance. Habi knew she'd see his blank stare again in her dreams.

Gothmis stumbled through the chaos, dying of a hundred wounds, wearing a face of blood. He collapsed near a small body and began keening shrilly. The noise attracted the furious, and several ran towards him.

Tears ran down Habi's cheeks as she watched Balmora die.

"Beautiful, isn't it? We'll have our pick of the survivors." The red-haired woman had joined them. "I'm Eola. I've been chosen by Namira to shepherd her most faithful into the light of day. It's a

shame you won't be a part of what comes after."

Habi said nothing. Her mind had gone away to a place where it could continue to exist. They returned to the tent before any of the rampaging townsfolk could take notice of them. The last she saw, many of the guards were sprinting towards the town proper, swords and axes drawn.

"Let me have this one," Banuril murmured. He squeezed her again, and ran his tongue across her cheek. Habi flinched. "I've had my eye on her for years."

"Tough, kid." Banning glared at him. "You're awful fresh to be making demands. It's gonna be tough to find meat out there that ain't been all torn up. I did all the work, took all the risks. That little gray flower belongs to me."

"Silence," Eola's cold voice rang out. "Neither of you will eat of this girl's flesh. I received an interesting message from Solstheim a few days ago. We have a secondary target, now, in addition to the meal of prophecy. And Habisunilu here is going to help us gather both of them. Search her."

Banning's hands were rough. Habi stared blankly ahead as he pulled at her clothes, spilling her coin purse on to the floor. He yanked her letter to Nadene from a back pocket, and Eola snatched the parchment off the ground.

"This will do nicely," she muttered, reading quickly. "We'll just have to make a few adjustments before the courier arrives. Banning, you'll stay here with seven of our newest and take care of any survivors. Make certain that the mail ship suspects nothing. That should buy us a fortnight before House Redoran sends anyone to investigate. After that, load up some carts with the dead and rejoin us at the mountain."

"With pleasure."

Erاندur burst in to the tent, mace drawn. He smashed Banuril's head like a ripe kwama egg, and pivoted swiftly to crush the chest of a lunging cannibal. Habi fell to the ground. *Run, fool, run*, she thought, but her mouth would not form the words.

Eola laughed, her face splattered with blood, and sent a green spell flying. In such close quarters, Erандur couldn't dodge the orb of energy. He collapsed next to Habi, limbs stiff.

"Was wonderin' where that one got off to," Banning said, looking down none too sadly at Banuril's twitching corpse. "Shame about the boy, though."

Eola seized Erандur and pushed him up against the canvas wall with surprising strength. She drew a long, cruel-looking dagger from her hip. Habi watched, helpless, frozen in fear and denial.

"Dagon?" Erандur asked, once he could. His eyes were glossy and unfocused. "Or...Vaermina, perhaps?"

"Wrong," Eola sang out, and shoved the dagger into his shoulder. He cried out. The sound set Habi's soul alight. "Though we did borrow one of her artifacts, to wake up some of our sleeping brothers and sisters." She pulled the dripping dagger free.

"Aye." Erандur spat blood. His voice trembled. "Skull of Corruption. Thought I recognized its effects, when I heard about the missing elves."

"Yes. Recruiting cannibals is a lot less messier when you can see into their dreams. I found it in the clutches of a burgeoning Vaermina cult in Hag's End. I suspect they were planning on moving in on Markarth following our exodus." Eola clicked her tongue. "I can't suffer rivals."

"Damn it all. I should've known destroying that wretched staff wouldn't be the end of things."

"Congratulations." Eola pushed her blade in his chest, and this time Erandur didn't scream.

She left her dagger sticking out as he slid to the ground.

Banning knelt down and picked up Habi. She was limp in his arms, a broken doll. He pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek.

The screams and roars from outside were growing nearer.

"Time for us to go," Eola announced. "Our business in Balmora is concluded, my siblings. Banning, you know your assignment. I hope to see you again before the day of triumph."

He nodded. All around them, cultists were taking out thin potion bottles and drinking them down. One by one, they vanished. Banning forced Habi to down one of the vials, and she watched her own body disappear. She felt like an abandoned soul floating in the aether, formless, without voice, doomed to eternal torment. Eola was the last to drink. She looked down at Erandur, smiling.

"Goodbye, now. Your soul can go to Mara. What's left belongs to us."

Habi closed her eyes and surrendered to the darkness.

Later, Erandur pulled himself out of the tent. He left smears of blood behind, but he paid them little attention. Whatever the Breton woman's blade had been coated in seemed to dull the senses. Unfortunately, the poison had also rendered his legs unusable. *An ideal scenario, if one were trying to eat me.* But Erandur couldn't worry about silly things like walking right now. Black spots danced at the edges of his vision, and every time he felt the walls closing in he pressed his body against the ground to summon the hot waves of pain. Conscious thought quickly became a thing of the past. *Come now, Erandur. Casamir. We have to hold on for a little while longer.*

He crawled like a child past still and squirming bodies, listening to the groans of the dying and doing his best to ignore the silence of the dead. Erandur followed the only group of footsteps in the ash that didn't trail off in all directions. The afflicted and the fleeing had all stood alone, for the most part, and so their panicked treads were easy to distinguish.

Some time later, his left arm stopped responding as well, so Erandur was forced to drag himself inch by inch as he followed the trail. Fortunately, none of the townspeople had fled this far, so the only tracks were those of his adversaries. Somewhere along the way Erandur had picked up a quiver of arrows. He paused for the first time, his working hand trembling. *Habi. Habi. Habi.*

Erandur reached into the quiver on his back and seized an arrow, using a significant reserve of his remaining strength to plunge it into the ground. He laid panting for a little while, the pain of his injuries fading to a dull numb. *That's no good.* Soon, the wind would pick up, and the footsteps would be gone. Soon after that, he would be gone as well. Erandur lifted his head, watching the trail of steps run down the hill and towards the ash wastes. *So far to go. Mara, give me strength.* He clenched his teeth, grabbed another handful of ash, and pulled himself forward.

The Passage of Emptiness

"I am only what time and circumstances made me. Son of a lost house. Friend to a fallen king. Some will tell you that we are the product of our choices. I've never found that to be the case." - Sotha Sil

"Captain Devhi is in charge of the Vvardenfell route, but the last boat left yesterday and won't be back in Vvardenfell for a fortnight." The port master, Wynil, rubbed his eyes.

"Apologies for the lateness of the hour." Gelebor forced a smile. "We're in a bit of a hurry." His mace was clipped to his belt. Nadene had ran from the house in such a rush, he hadn't been certain they weren't leaving the city immediately.

"Won't make a lick of difference." Wynil replied dispassionately, leaning back in his chair. Gelebor had a feeling he wasn't pleased at being woken up at such a late hour. "Even if Devhi could find a navigator available who knew the Vvardenfell routes, he wouldn't let you aboard."

"Why not? I'm sure we have enough gold to pay for the trip."

"Nah, ya don't get me. He wouldn't let *you* board. The situation on Vvardenfell is still, hmm, delicate. If an outlander wants to settle in Balmora, they have to petition the Redoran elders in Blacklight and wait for their ruling."

"How long would that take?" He saw Nadene through the window, arguing with a grizzled old Dunmer on the docks. "We don't want to settle. We believe the colony may be in danger."

Wynil shrugged. "Sounds like ya ought to speak with Second Councilor Arano. All I can tell you is, Devhi won't have any pity for you, and he's not going to break the law on your account."

"Would we have better luck in Blacklight?"

"You'll still have to go through the petition process." Wynil yawned. "And just getting to the city would take a week, with those storms rolling in."

Gelebor thanked the port master and headed towards Nadene, the sound of raised voices growing louder.

"Two thousand gold," she pleaded, arms crossed.

"No deal, s'wit." Devhi was an old Dunmer, with long gray hair spilling down his shoulders, and long cruel lines on his face.

"That's more than enough, and you know it." She waved a hand at the ship floating behind him. "We can go right now. Three thousand gold."

"I told you, fool, I don't even know the routes. My only lieutenant who does left yesterday, and won't be back for weeks. Keep your blighted gold, it will do you no good."

"You don't understand!" Nadene stepped towards him, fists clenched. She took a deep breath, and continued more quietly. "I need to get to Vvardenfell. Someone very dear to me is in danger. I'm...I'm the Nerevarine."

Devhi opened his mouth to speak, and closed it, looking at her suspiciously.

"Say you're telling the truth, and not spouting a load of guarshit." He spit on the deck, and glared at them. "Nerevarine never did anything for me or mine."

"What?" Nadene looked more taken aback than Gelebor had ever seen her. "I killed Dagoth Ur. I stopped the blight from taking all you miserable s'wits. I saved Vvardenfell!"

"I'm Dres." Devhi stepped closer. "None of my ancestors lived on that cursed island. And it doesn't seem you saved it for very long, or else you wouldn't be begging at my feet to take you to a ruin. Where were ya when the lizards poured over the border and set Morrowind on fire?"

"Dres?" Nadene matched his stance, speaking through clenched teeth. Gelebor prepared to grab her if she struck the captain. "I'll tell you where I was when the waters of your saltrice plantations ran red. I was watching, and laughing, and wishing the Argonians good fortune. Because you slaving bastards were *deserving*."

"Bitch!" He pushed her backwards with surprising strength. Gelebor caught her before she could stumble off the docks and into the freezing water below.

"You...you..." She stuttered, blinking quickly. Gelebor gripped her shoulders tightly. *I don't know that she won't kill this fool. That's definitely not something we need right now.*

"Tell you what." Devhi smirked. "Come by my cabin later, and you might make enough gold to charter yourself a ship in Blacklight. I've never had a Nerevarine before. That way we can both leave this arrangement...satisfied."

Gelebor gently pushed Nadene behind him. *No Auriel. No limits on what I'm capable of.*

"What are you, her man slave?"

"Not quite." He lunged forward and tackled Devhi. They both went flying off the docks, and for a moment the warm night air rushed past. Then they plunged into the bay. The water was cool and refreshing, and only a little ashy.

I'd wager our good captain may feel different. He savored the feeling for a moment. Devhi panicked at first, shuddering and gasping. Gelebor watched him flail, bubbles rushing from his open mouth. But then the captain seemed to get a hold on himself, and began weakly swimming for the shore. Gelebor followed.

"N'wah!" Devhi sputtered, pulling himself on to land. "Fucking n'wah. I...I'll have the Redoran Guard throw you in irons!"

"Oh no you won't." Nadene said from above them. She was in the process of floating down from the docks.

Devhi scrambled backwards, watching her warily as she landed next to Gelebor.

"Are you okay?" She helped him to his feet.

"I'm fine," Gelebor answered, hiding his shaking hands behind his back. "Just a little adrenaline. It's rather difficult for one of my kind to die of exposure."

"What in Oblivion are you people?" Devhi drew a dagger and pointed it at them. He trembled and shivered, water dripping from his hair. "Tel-Telvanni?"

Nadene glared. "No. And you'd best put that blade away before you hurt yourself."

"B'vek, what kind of fool do you take me for?" Devhi stepped closer. "If you raise a hand against me, I'll scream like a nix hound. Even if no one comes in time to save my life, the Guard will know the elves who did me in."

"Fine, then. We're leaving anyway."

"Think again, f'lah. Stay where ya are, or I'll throw this dagger at pretty boy's face. Unlike you, I've got a means of escape floating right beside us. And House Redoran will be sure to forgive my minor crimes if I can bring them some extra trade goods from Port Telvannis."

"You're shaking like a child. You couldn't hit the broad side of your ship. Stow your weapon, fool, or make ready to meet your gods."

Devhi bristled, and his fingers tightened around the hilt of his dagger. Tendrils of green energy shimmered in Nadene's palm.

"What seems to be the problem here, my friends?" Kharjo said, looking down at them from up on the docks.

"We've found ourselves in a spot of trouble, Kharjo." Gelebor gripped Nadene's shoulder, trying to dissuade her from attacking but ready to throw them both out of the way if necessary.

"Hmm. Khajiit knows the look of trouble well. He has become well acquainted with its signs. But I don't believe I see trouble here. Just misunderstanding."

"Stay up there, betmer," Devhi snarled. "I could always use a new rug in my cabin."

"But how will I show you my bag of jingly gold coins from up on this dock?" Kharjo held out a drooping canvas sack.

"Coins?" There was a familiar hunger in Devhi's eyes. Gelebor was unpleasantly reminded of Mogrul and Slitter.

"Yes. Khajiit might be persuaded to let you hold on to this bag for him, if his friends were allowed to leave the shore in peace."

Devhi's brow creased. "Throw me one of them coins, cat. I won't be tricked."

"Tricked? Do you take Kharjo for a follower of the Prince of Bargains?" But Kharjo set down the sack and reached inside to grab a coin. The gold glittered in the dim moonlight. He tossed the coin over Gelebor's head, and it landed in the ash near Devhi. The captain snatched it up, never lowering his dagger, and examined it suspiciously. He brought it to his mouth and bit down.

"Kharjo must warn you, his gold is not for eating. He will not be held responsible for any damaged teeth."

"Shove it, cat." But Devhi was apparently satisfied with his test. "Come down, real slow like, or your masters here will be screaming in seconds."

Kharjo bowed his head slightly and descended the ladder. Nadene let the paralysis spell fizzle from her hand, but Gelebor felt her muscles were still tensed. *Little surprise that she expects treachery.*

As Kharjo passed them, Gelebor opened his mouth to whisper a question, but the Khajiit pointedly turned away from them. Devhi watched greedily as he approached.

"No closer!" He raised the dagger. "Drop the sack. And all of you, get out of my blighted sight. You'll never board a ship flying my sails."

"N'wah would probably crash us into Skyrim, anyway," Nadene muttered. They climbed up the ashy slopes towards the city gate, Kharjo quickly joining them.

"Kharjo must admit, it pains him to speak ill of his new friends," he said, "But you both acted foolishly."

"What?" Nadene turned her head sharply.

"Pushing old elves into water, waving spells around like they are New Life festival tricks. I would expect such behavior from impulsive young kittens."

"That bastard pushed me!"

"You have to admit, Kharjo," Gelebor said. He held the gate open so they could pass through. The Redoran guard on the other side grumbled something unintelligible at them. "That elf was indeed scum of the lowest sort."

"I know this," he replied. "I know this because I had dealings with him before, when I tried to travel to Vvardenfell alone, back when I still had the coin. This Khajiit could have told you that outlanders must endure a lengthy process. He is still waiting for word of his own petition, after weeks and weeks. Perhaps together, we could have figured something out."

Nadene groaned in agitation. They passed the Retching Netch, where the scent of sujamma and spice filled the street and sounds of clinking glass and laughter slipped around the cracks in the doors.

"But now no sailor in Raven Rock will give us service. We have made a new enemy when we need new friends the most."

"I'm sorry, okay?" Nadene suddenly stopped and turned around. She looked towards Red Mountain, her face still. "The only one I love in this world has been taken by followers of Namira. I just...I just need to get to Vvardenfell."

"I understand," Kharjo said softly. "More than any other being could. If I can snatch an innocent life from the hungry clutches of those who took everything from me, then my revenge will taste all the more sweeter. And naturally, I will look towards rescue before vengeance. But Kharjo knows the path you walk. If you look closely, you will see my fading footprints ahead. If you want to know where they'll lead, you need only recall the broken Khajiit you discovered in that warehouse."

"Maybe you're right." They continued towards the house, more slowly. Gelebor could almost feel the waves of frustration rolling off of Nadene, and he couldn't help but share in her helplessness. Of course he had no desire to travel to an island of people that considered him fine dining, but he could at least help Nadene get there.

"What about the Telvanni?" He asked gently. "Surely they must have methods of traveling to their holdings on Vvardenfell."

"Yes." She seemed to seize on to the idea with disturbing alacrity. "That's it. That's it! Neloth must have some way to get to the island."

"Hold on. First, we need to warn Second Councilor Arano of the danger-"

But she had already sprinted back towards the Netch. He looked after her helplessly, and Kharjo grinned, the ends of his whiskers going up.

"This one must ask." They moved off of the street to stand under a small awning. "Who are you, to the Nerevarine? If the cultists hunt you with such ferocity, surely you must be an elf of great importance."

Who I am to Nadene? Gelebor wasn't sure of that, himself. The second question was decidedly easier to answer. Or so he thought at first.

"I'm..." Gelebor stared off into the middle distance. A few Dunmer passed them wordlessly, consumed with their own affairs. "I'm not really sure who I am, really. A week ago I could have answered you."

"At first Kharjo believed you to be the Nerevarine's partner."

"Err...I don't know. Partners in a platonic sense, maybe. Like two good...friends." But the word tasted false on Gelebor's tongue, for reasons he couldn't discern. The utter dread he'd felt watching her read Habinisulu's letter...did friends feel each other's pain so acutely?

There was no frame of reference there. The memory of his friends in the Chantry has faded to such a degree that he could only recall their names, words that provoked no feeling in him but a dim and hollow grief to which he could attach no recollections of life. They were just gravestones in his mind. Surely Nadene was more than that.

"Forgive me for being so familiar so quickly," Kharjo was saying. "This Khajiit's tongue has not had the chance to waggle in many moons."

"Think nothing of it." He smiled. "I've had my fill of silence."

Nadene was coming back towards them, deftly slipping through the night walkers. There was a determination in her manner that worried and excited him.

"We're going," she said, and grabbed his hand. He was too surprised by the feeling of her cool skin to speak at first. By the time she'd grabbed Kharjo as well and pulled them both into the open, it was too late.

"Nadene-"

A warmth enveloped him, and then a tingling, like a diminished shock from a Dwemer spider. The world around them snapped into being. Great towering trees swayed in the night and ash blew in the wind. This was an immediately familiar place.

"Good," Nadene murmured. "My Recall marker survived. Tel Mithryn isn't too far from here."

"By the fur of Alkosh..." Kharjo stumbled away from them, rubbing his arms. "Please, warn Khajiit next time. He was not prepared to be vanished."

The fires had settled, but massive chunks of blackened mushroom and burnt wood littered the clearing. They stood in the remnants of Nadene's garden. The myriad of colors and scents he'd so dearly treasured had gone, replaced by a swath of scorched grass. Piles of ash surrounded the three. He frowned.

"Sorry," Nadene said again, and started off towards the forest. Gelebor grabbed her shoulder before she could take another step.

"Wait." She turned her head, eyes wide like a vale fawn. "Please. We're a team, Nadene. I need to know our plan. So does Kharjo."

Before she could respond, the treeline erupted with sound. Loud, gurgling groans that silenced the night insects in an instant. And the shuffling of many feet, like those of predators that cared not about being heard. Kharjo rejoined them, his brow raised.

"You have some interesting sounding neighbors, my friends."

"I've never heard anything like that," Gelebor said. "And I lived here for some time."

"Oh, no. You wouldn't have." A strange note of bitterness cut through Nadene's words, but it was preferable to the rising hysteria he'd heard before. "I kept those bastards away. Now all my defenses have gone."

A shapeless lump of gray shambled out from the trees. Twin pinpricks of cruel crimson light turned towards them, and even from across the clearing Gelebor imagined he could feel the waves of hatred and pain. More of the monsters broke through, their groans growing louder.

"Ashspawn," Nadene spat. "Despicable creatures."

"Elder Othrelloth spoke of them once." Gelebor drew his mace, the weight a welcome effort. He bemoaned that the Snow Prince's armor was still at the Raven Rock smithy. "Perhaps they were attracted by the fire."

"Whatever their source," Kharjo said, "I believe we may be outnumbered."

He was right. Behind them, branches cracked and misshapen feet crunched the forest snow. A bolt of fire flew from the treeline, soaring over their heads. Between the dark trees, flickering orange lights heralded further destruction.

"Oh, dear." Gelebor knelt and unstrapped a dagger from his boot. He held out it out to Kharjo. "Try to stay behind me, friend. You're in no condition to fight."

"Do not fear, Knight-Paladin. Kharjo has no wish to be remembered as a Khajiit who died bravely."

"We don't have time for this!" Nadene snapped, drawing her bow and nocking an arrow in one fluid motion. Almost before Gelebor could blink, she'd sent an arrow flying towards the first visible ashspawn, and more projectiles soon followed.

The undead burst apart into dust and ore. Nadene's arms moved like clockwork. But for every ashspawn that fell, two more came forward, and an unholy cry rose from their ranks. Glowing gray shapes rushed towards the ruined tower from all directions.

He raised his mace and moved in front of Kharjo. Nadene cursed and waved her hand, and shimmering blue light washed over them. A moment later a bolt of flame winged Gelebor's side and he grunted. It hurt, but not as much as it should have. *Magical armor. Lovely.*

Gelebor easily felled the first ashspawn to slip past Nadene's frantic firing, and the second and third as well. More fireballs came towards them, but the mage armor did a good enough job of shielding them that Gelebor could take a full impact and stay on his feet. *For now, at least.* More sweat poured down his ivory skin with every minute that passed. He'd not fought in a prolonged engagement for...well, his entire life, really.

"B'vek!" A smaller ashspawn, that had once perhaps been a Dunmer child, had crept up on them

and tackled Nadene. She beat at the monster with her bow. Gelebor turned to help her, but found himself engaged with his own ashspawn.

Then Kharjo twisted forward and plunged his dagger into the dead child's head. Its remnants showered Nadene, and she jumped to her feet coughing up ash, already reaching for an arrow. But the damage had been done. Countless groaning shapes ran towards them, their blades of rock and ore raised high.

Kharjo hissed, slashing and thrusting with his dagger, and Gelebor tried his best to take the brunt of the attacks. The mage armor grew less effective with every blow that got past his defenses.

"Auriel preserve me," Gelebor prayed without thinking, and did not have time to curse himself for it. He swung his mace again, annihilating an ashspawn, but another one immediately seized on to his arm. Gelebor struggled to knock it away as more closed in. *Damn, damn, damn.*

Small fingers closed around his shoulder, and the mage armor was renewed. He dared a glance at his savior and saw Nadene's slender gray face, her eyes wider than he'd ever seen them. *For whom is she so afraid? Neither of us would turn away from death.* But then he got his answer, from a yowling cry that split through the groans of the ashspawn. *Kharjo!*

Gelebor roared and split apart two undead with one blow, his mace passing through them easily. He intercepted a firebolt with his arm and took the caster's ashy head off. In a rare second of calm, he noticed the noises from the treeline had stopped. There were no more coming.

That only seemed to incense the remaining ashspawn. While these monsters seemed to care little for strategy, they also had no regard for their own survival. Three fell on Gelebor at once with fire and sword, and his mace was lost. He'd been separated from Nadene, but heard the distant twanging of arrows. The sound hardened his resolve.

He grabbed the head of one ashspawn and crushed it in his fist, and used the monster's blade to skewer another. The last one advanced on him, greatsword swinging, but Gelebor dodged the blow and grabbed a large shard of ebony from among the piles of ash. He leapt forward and jabbed the razor sharp rock again and again into the ashspawn's face. It exploded into dust. Gelebor fell to his knees, panting.

There were no more groans. A light breeze blew through the clearing, scattering the ash to the warm air. He smelled rain coming. Or worse. Black clouds covered the moons. Someone was making a horrible noise, somewhere.

"Nadene?" He stumbled to his feet. "Nadene!"

He found her crying over Kharjo, face buried in her hands. Gelebor pushed her aside and put two fingers to the Khajiit's neck. Then he pushed up the sleeve of Kharjo's robe and checked the inside of his elbow, as well. Just to make certain.

"I was so stupid," Nadene sobbed. "So damn stupid and *selfish!* After all he survived...oh, Azura. I should have died with the rest of them."

"He's alive," Gelebor said, examining the wounds on Kharjo's side. "You healed him well. But we need to go."

He picked up Kharjo. The Khajiit was scarcely heavier than a sack of oats. He made for the treeline, limping past piles of ash, and only stopped when he realized Nadene wasn't following.

"Come on," he called. "There's an ashstorm coming. And more ashspawn with it, I'd wager."

"No." She stared at the black clouds spreading across the night sky.

"Why?"

"I'll just get you killed. I get everyone killed. Vivec, Almalexia, Sotha Sil, Dagoth Ur...they were great. They were fucking *gods*. How could I have killed the gods? Why did Nerevar Indoril choose such a pathetic wretch to be his reincarnation? *Why me?*"

"Please. No more."

"I'm nothing." Her hands clenched, and ash squished through her closed fingers. "Less than nothing. I should have stayed in Cyrodiil with my father. Those Camonna Tong I met in Balmora, my first day on Vvardenfell, and Devhi...they were right. I'm an n'wah. I'm *stupid*, I'm ugly, I don't deserve happiness, I don't deserve *death*..."

"We're going to find a way to that cursed island, together."

She broke off her tortured tirade, looking up at him with glossy eyes.

"Yes. We're going to save your granddaughter and kill those who stole Kharjo's family from him. And then I'm going to take you somewhere far away from all this Divines-damned ash and heat. Somewhere where you never have to see Red Mountain again." He swallowed. "Would you... would you like that?"

She nodded after a moment's hesitation, her face raw and wet.

"Then come with me, now. Please. None of us will survive a night in the open."

Nadene followed, and Gelebor took them to a small cave in the forest that he'd once discovered on a walk with the guar. A small forest stream ran down the hill leading up to the opening, thankfully free of ash for the moment. Perhaps a bear had lived in the cave, once, but nothing leapt out of the darkness now when they crept inside. He set Kharjo down near the entrance and found Nadene standing behind him like a child waiting to be instructed. He didn't have time to devote any thought to her transformation, however.

"Stay here," Gelebor ordered. "Watch over our friend. I'm going to go find some wood, water, and maybe some food."

She nodded again, her chin lowered.

He swore every muscle in his body groaned when he stepped out of the cave, but there was nothing for it. *I'll sleep during the storm*. If another dream of death and ruin was waiting for him, Gelebor was in no hurry. He collected the driest twigs and branches he could find, the rumbling sky hastening his steps.

He also managed to catch a squirrel and a bunch of berries before the rising winds forced him back to the cave with the spoils. Nadene had moved Kharjo deeper inside, presumably to shield him from the ash now blowing inside. *She must be exhausted, using so much of her magic in so short a time*.

"I think we'll be okay," Gelebor said. Nadene looked up at him with that vulnerable, open expression that he wasn't sure exactly what to do with. Kharjo was snoring softly.

"Wait," she said, when he began building the fire.

"Yes?"

"You..." She swallowed, and crawled forward to grab his hands. "You can't build a fire in a cave, endling. We'll run out of oxygen. Or the rocks above will crack and fall."

"Oh." He blinked at his useless wood pile. "I wish you'd told me that before."

"I'm sorry." Her voice cracked, and she turned away.

"Hey. It's alright." Gelebor knelt and put a hand on her shoulder. The muscles there were tense, but soon relaxed under his fingers. "We've had a rough week."

"We?"

"Yes." His mind flashed to the Vale, to a lone elf standing vigil for millennia, mostly safe from danger, content in his faith. *I can never go back to that.* "Yes, always. You're stuck with me, Nadene Othryn."

"I don't deserve it," she said quietly.

"Fortunately, that isn't for you to decide." He crept up beside her, stretching out his long legs. Though her shields had kept him from getting seriously injured, Gelebor already felt bruises forming all over. "Want some berries?"

"No." Nadene shifted beside him, and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Well, yes. I'm starving."

They ate berries and watched Kharjo sleep. *Little point in keeping watch during an ash storm.* There was something comforting about watching their friend's chest rise and fall, as howling winds buffeted the cave like great waves against an island shore.

"Do you remember your mother's face, endling?"

"No. I was found squalling in the snow as a babe." He rolled a berry between his fingers. "Vyrthur was beside me. The elf that found us sent us to be raised in the Chantry."

Nadene's hand found his in the darkness, and their fingers laced together.

Gelebor raised his brow. "What about you?"

"My mother, no. But my father...he had a great black beard, like some bandit from Skyrim. And a bellowing laugh to match." She sighed. "I wish I'd gone to see him before he passed. I was just, I don't know..."

"Afraid?" He offered.

"Yes. And now, apparently too stupid to learn from my mistakes. I haven't seen Habi in over a year, and after that letter..."

"Hush." Gelebor made to push her bangs out of her eyes, but hesitated, his hand hovering. She closed her eyes and nudged her head forward. He let his long fingers slide through her hair. *Oh, my.*

He spoke, "Tell me about Habi."

Nadene smiled softly. "Well, she was born at my tower, because I wasn't going to let some decrepit Balmora priest deliver my granddaughter..."

They spoke for hours, the cave shielding them from time and wind, and fell asleep in each other's arms. And Gelebor did not dream.

Introjection

When Nerevar returned, he saw the frozen comet above his lord's city. He asked whether or not Vivec wanted it removed.

'I would have done so myself if I wanted, silly Hortator. I shall keep it there with its last intention intact, so that if the love of the people of this city for me ever disappear, so shall the power that holds back their destruction.'

Nerevar said, 'Love is under your will only.'

Vivec smiled and told the Hortator that he had become a Minister of Truth.

The ending of the words is ALMSIVI. -

36 Lessons of Vivec, Sermon 33

When Gelebor awoke, he and Nadene were alone. The winds had withdrawn and the air was calm, but there was no sign of the Khajiit they'd slept next to during the night. Gelebor despaired at first, searching every craggy corner of the cave. *Perhaps he found the trials of yesterday to be overwhelming.*

"What darkens your thoughts on such a lovely morning?" Kharjo stepped into view, a steaming bowl in his hands. "Come outside. Khajiit has made breakfast for his companions."

"Thank the gods," Nadene mumbled, and rolled to her feet. They followed Kharjo and the scent of cooking meat and herbs to a campfire outside, over which a dwarven pot was bubbling merrily.

"Hey, isn't that my pot?"

"Yes." Kharjo beckoned them to sit down on some tree trunks. "Khajiit found it among the tower ruins."

"Fair enough." Nadene took her stew and dug in.

"You should have told us you'd gone," Gelebor said, accepting an offered bowl. "You've not healed completely, friend. Wicked creatures roam these woods, and they prey on the weak and injured."

"Kharjo is *not*-" He bared his fangs, something unfamiliar flashing across his face. The Khajiit took a deep breath. "Kharjo is not weak. But thank you for worrying, Knight-Paladin. My wounds have been masterfully healed."

Gelebor exchanged a worried glance with Nadene over their bowls.

"We're a team," Nadene said, studying Kharjo with hard eyes. "Last night, what I did, teleporting us without warning into peril...that was a mistake. I'm sorry. We should have talked first. I understand more now. Or maybe...maybe I'm just remembering what I shouldn't have forgotten. I've been alone, fighting alone, for too long."

"That goes for all of us, I think," Gelebor said, stirring his bowl absentmindedly. "The people we're up against are cold, calculating, and ruthless. If the cultist who captured me hadn't stopped to...have a taste, I'd have been captured that night."

"No." Nadene asserted. "I'd have saved you."

"Regardless, her passion was her weakness. We can't make the same mistake. There are more of them, and they know we're coming." Gelebor looked at his companions. "No rash actions. No heroic sacrifices. We act as one, or Habisunilu will be lost and the cultists will get what they came for."

"Agreed." Nadene raised her dripping spoon.

Kharjo hesitated, his whiskers twitching. "Khajiit mostly likes the sound of this plan, but for one part. I must be the one to strike down their leader. The witch monster Eola. She was the one who dragged the knife across Zaynabi's throat."

"I would have it no other way," Gelebor agreed.

"Then I will stand beside you both until the end," Kharjo declared, raising his own spoon. "We will make Namira howl."

They ate in silence. The forest was still, the branches of the trees drooping from the weight of fallen ash. In time, the creatures of Solstheim would return, but for now they were still in hiding and so the three of them were alone around the fire. Gelebor found he preferred this to Raven Rock, where he never quite felt safe. Even with Mogrul and Slitter gone, the Dunmer city could never be a home to him. His bright skin attracted eyes both distrustful and deceitful.

"Alright," Nadene said. She set down her bowl. "Tel Mithryn is to the south and east, maybe a half day's journey. But if another ash storm hits, that could turn into three days or more. I'm not waiting that long."

"I got the impression when we first met you aren't on the best terms with the Telvanni," Gelebor replied. "Has anything changed?"

"No." She helped Kharjo stamp out the last embers of their campfire. "I only met Neloth once, before I was Nerevarine. I'd come across his grand tower in Sadrith Mora, and wandered inside. He pretended not to hear me talking until I left."

"Perhaps the centuries have mellowed him."

"Ha. The best case scenario is that we're tolerated, and that maybe he'll let us use whatever form of transportation he has. Probably in return for some despicable favor."

They ducked back into the cave to gather their meager supplies.

Kharjo spoke, "This one wonders if this mage lord holds reverence for the one who defeated Dagoth Ur, if not for Nadene Othryn."

"Maybe." Nadene tossed Gelebor his satchel. "Though we've shared Solstheim for two centuries as the two most powerful elves, and he's never sought me out. Neloth's either willfully ignorant of beings he considers beneath him, or extraordinary self-centered."

Gelebor replied, "From what you've told me of the Telvanni, likely both."

"Do not worry," Kharjo said, after catching sight of Nadene's face. "Kharjo will take us to Vvardenfell himself if he has to, in a dinghy with a scathecrawl sail."

"I appreciate the thought. If we arrive too late to save Habi, I'll..."

"Don't think of it," Gelebor urged, placing a hand on the small of her back to guide her out of the

cave. To his surprise, she didn't stiffen. *Perhaps our talk last night had a lasting impact.*

They stepped out into the morning sunlight. With the ash storm over, and a brisk wind rising in the air, Solstheim was nearly tolerable. Nadene looked up at the sun, squinting, and set off towards the treeline. Gelebor and Kharjo followed.

After a while the Nerevarine's forest thinned out and their feet sunk deeper into the ash. On this part of the island great mushrooms had sprouted up to serve as a substitute to the absent trees. At first they brought to mind Nadene's tower, and it was with bittersweet countenance that Gelebor marveled at their towering beauty and fortitude. Where the snowy sentinels of Hirstaag Forest had once stood, now were the fungi, and they were a vastly preferable sight to the barren ash wastes of western Solstheim.

"How did they get here?" Gelebor wondered aloud. They were passing beneath a scattering of the mycelial towers, the sunlight shining through their translucent caps. "Surely the eruption should have destroyed them, as it did the forest."

"Don't know," Nadene said. There was a rigidity in her shoulders and a stubbornness in her step; they hadn't stopped for hours, ever since leaving the cave.

"Khajiit reckons spores may have blown here from elsewhere. During his travels in Skyrim, he saw great mushrooms growing in the volcanic steamflats of central Eastmarch. He believes they were sent there from Vvardenfell by the eruption."

"Remarkable." Gelebor glanced at Kharjo. The Khajiit walked slower than them; that was to be expected, given his long months of poor living. But now he noticed that Kharjo limped slightly, and winced every now and then when he thought no one was looking.

Kharjo caught Gelebor's eye and shook his head, glancing meaningfully at Nadene's back. Gelebor grimaced and then nodded. *He doesn't want to be the reason we stop, though I suspect Nadene wouldn't hesitate if he made his pains known.* Well, Kharjo could hold on to his pride for now, but if his condition worsened then Gelebor would make up some excuse for them to rest for a while. His own body was still aching from last night's fight. The waves of ashspawn staggering towards them in the darkness...that was an image that wouldn't leave his mind for a long time. It had to be worse for Nadene, knowing that the monsters had once been elves. Maybe even elves that she'd once known.

But I can't think of such things. There are enough dead to mourn already, without conjuring up new ones.

Kharjo stumbled on a trama root and nearly fell, but Gelebor caught his arm at the last second. Nadene turned and looked at them sharply.

"Are you okay?" Her voice softened. "Do we need to stop for a little while?"

"How much longer to Tel Mithryn?" Kharjo asked.

"Two or three hours, if the weather holds."

"Khajiit will live." Kharjo steadied himself, brushing the ash off his trousers. "Surviving is what he does best."

"I've found there's a difference," Gelebor said, "between the first and the second. A being can endure unimaginable agonies in the name of survival."

"My love and our two children died screaming amidst gnashing teeth and tearing nails, Gelebor." Kharjo didn't look at them as he passed. "I'll never know the depths of their suffering. And I have already sworn not to act rashly. But if my legs hurt a bit so I may avenge them faster, so be it."

Nadene looked at Gelebor and shrugged. The sun beat down at them from the open sky, sending trickles of sweat down his skin. Red Mountain was starkly visible on the horizon, the always present smoke trickling out like steam from a kettle. Gelebor cursed and followed after them.

The mushroom tower of Tel Mithryn was a pleasant and painful sight. Looking up at the three towering fungi, Gelebor could not help think of Nadene's own lost home once again. To his surprise, this settlement was obviously less mature than her own had been; the skin of the mushrooms was less weathered, and the tower as a whole seemed to hold an altogether younger spirit. While the largest of the mushrooms seemed to be finished growing, its two smaller counterparts were still in the hands of nature, judging by the arching wildness of their appearance.

"How are these towers made?" Gelebor asked. They approached Tel Mithryn from the north, coming down carefully from the rolling hills. Past the settlement, sunlight glittered like moonstone off the waters of the Inner Sea. The scent of woodsmoke drifted past. *Neloth is home. Reassuring to know we haven't come all this way for naught.*

"Not really sure," Nadene replied. "Grew mine mostly from guesswork and instructions from old tomes. At the time, days after the eruption, I wasn't sure if there were any Telvanni left alive. Wasn't sure that the Dunmer race hadn't been reduced to a thousand or a hundred. That's probably why mine never got as tall as Neloth's. I didn't know what I was doing."

"I think you did a fine job."

"Well, thanks."

"If this one may ask," Kharjo said, stepping deftly over a large rock. "Where did the Nerevarine live when she roamed Vvardenfell? We may need a place on the island to hold out, if Balmora has fallen to Namira."

"A wise thought," Nadene said, "but in vain. I lived in a manor on Bal Isra, in the western Ashlands. Though I had a Recall marker in my bedroom, the whole estate is likely buried under a mountain of ash now. After the Red Year, I never heard from any of my stewards or oathmen again." Her voice took on a gloomy, reflective quality that Gelebor didn't much care for. He was reminded of the night at her tower, before he'd known she was the Nerevarine, when she'd told him she'd once lived on Vvardenfell. She was falling into one of her moods. Gelebor wished he knew how to pull her out.

"Kharjo is sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. I deserved it. We all did, mostly. Except for the children."

Gelebor winced. "Nadene..."

They stopped under the shadow of Tel Mithryn.

"What? Nothing you say can save me, Gelebor. All the infants I saved from Dagoth Ur and the Blight lived to the ripe age of eleven before their mouths filled with ash and fire. I watched the ground melt and I heard the children scream and then stop screaming. And I would have died with them, if I could have. If Habi's family hadn't been clutching my hands..."

Gelebor opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted.

"Halt!" A sharp voice called down. "Who's come to visit the mighty Neloth, greatest of all the Telvanni?"

They all looked up at the balcony of the central tower, where a slender white-haired Dunmer was bent over the railing. The mer was wearing Daedric armor. Gelebor reached for his mace.

"You're not Neloth," Nadene said breathlessly.

"Thankfully," the Dunmer replied. "If you have come seeking an audience, you will leave disappointed. Neloth is away at the moment."

"Divayth? Divayth Fyr?"

The word seemed to sober the old mer. He straightened, wizened eyebrows furrowing, and peered at them suspiciously. Gelebor held his mace by his side, and matched the Dunmer's gaze. Kharjo watched them all in silence, his whiskers twitching.

"There are precious few walking Tamriel who know my face." Though the Dunmer brandished no weapons, Gelebor could feel the power and threat pointed towards them. "Step out of the shadows. You have me at a disadvantage. I must know you as ally or adversary."

"Be cautious," Gelebor warned. "This one wears the armor of our enemies."

"It's okay," she replied, and moved away from him. "It's me, Divayth! It's Nadene!"

"What?" Fyr seemed shocked. But then his lined face broke into a cheerful smile. "Nadene! Nerevar Incarnate! Lord Captain, lost child of destiny! I can scarcely believe it!"

He cast a spell, and floated down from the balcony. Gelebor took a few steps backward, still wary, and Kharjo matched his stance. Nadene, on the other hand, moved to meet the descending stranger.

"I thought you died," she said, her voice weak. "Everyone was gone, and the sky was on fire, and I thought..."

"Oh, no. Remember who you speak to, my dear." Fyr landed with grace, and took Nadene's hand. "I did not live four thousand years to be defeated by a minor apocalypse. But you..." He looked into her face, his brow furrowing.

Four thousand years? Gelebor could barely restrain his curiosity.

"What?" Nadene asked. "What is it?"

"I see the years have not been kind. Your face is as young as I remember, but your eyes show your true age." Fyr stroked her hand and frowned. "Please tell me you took my advice. Given so long ago, with the best of intentions. I see you brought some friends. But how long did you spend alone?"

"I...I don't know." Nadene trailed off, and Gelebor's heart ached at the pain in her words. "A few years, maybe..."

Fyr tilted his head.

"A century," Her voice broke. "Two. There were some guards, along the way..."

"Two hundred years, Nadene? All by yourself?" Even Gelebor, to whom emotions were still somewhat strange and alien, could hear the pity in his voice. "That was unwise."

Nadene collapsed, her face wrenching up with a sob, but Fyr caught her and held her as she wept against his ungodly chestplate. Gelebor met eyes with him over Nadene's shoulder. Fyr seemed immediately interested, his sharp crimson eyes taking in Gelebor's skin in an instant, but he said nothing for the moment.

Kharjo spoke, "This one does not mean to interrupt, but could we perhaps go inside? His legs are preparing to give up the ghost, and his throat aches for some warm tea."

"But of course." Fyr slipped his arm around Nadene's shoulder. "Follow. I will provide you with the hospitality befitting followers of the Nerevarine. We will afterwards discuss the foul tides of destiny that brought me to this farce of a fortress."

Kharjo followed him, and Gelebor joined them after a moment's hesitation. He was uneasy about the way this Divayth Fyr looked at him, but Nadene obviously trusted the elf. They'd come across people she'd met before, like Second Councilor Arano, but never someone she so obviously cared for. The sight of Nadene collapsing into this stranger's arms...it upset Gelebor, for reasons he could not fathom.

Why doesn't she trust me enough to take her mask off in the light of day, after all we've been through? Nadene hasn't seen this elf in two hundred years, from the sound of things, but she lays her soul bare to him in seconds. Thoughts unworthy of even the most godless of Snow Elves. Gelebor pushed them away the best he could, and followed Kharjo past the round doors of the largest mushroom.

The inside of Neloath's tower was pleasantly temperate; Gelebor presumed the air was regulated by some unseen magical means. They entered at the lowest point of the structure, at the base of the tower stem. In front of them was a circular platform glowing with runic energy. Fyr was already on the upper level, looking down. There was no sign of Nadene.

"The platform is enchanted," Fyr explained. "Neloath had it created so that his retainers could ascend to the main level without knowledge of levitation spells. Strangely thoughtful. Perhaps his black heart has softened since last we exchanged words. Merely step on to the platform and you will ascend."

Kharjo stepped closer to the platform, drumming his claws nervously against his thigh. Eventually, the weight of Fyr's stare seemed to convince him, and he acquiesced.

"Aah!"

Gelebor had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling at the sight of Kharjo's arms pinwheeling through the air.

Divayth Fyr had no such reservations, and was still chuckling to himself when Gelebor landed next to Kharjo, with markedly more grace.

"Hah. I understand now why Neloath had this put in." Fyr grinned. Up close, the strange mer was even more interesting to look upon. His long white hair stretched wildly past his shoulders, and there was a mad intensity in his eyes that Gelebor found near overwhelming. He could not long hold Fyr's gaze.

"Khajiit is glad he could amuse you so," Kharjo said, his arms crossed.

"You are certainly entertaining. Thank you. Neloth is a bore at the best of times, but I'd hoped to at least investigate his trinkets and items of power. I should have known the miserly bastard would take all his toys with him to Vvardenfell. I've had to content myself with reading through my personal library for the hundredth time."

"Neloth is on Vvardenfell?" Gelebor asked.

Fyr once more gave him that searching look before replying. "Yes. We will talk soon. After Nadene and I exchange private words."

"Is there some reason Kharjo and I can't take part in this discussion?"

Fyr nodded. "I do not know you. Presently, I care more about discussing matters with my old friend than I do about introductions. I will take the first step before leaving you in Athtera's capable hands."

As if on cue, a sapphire Argonian emerged from a side chamber with a tray of steaming tea cups. Past her, Gelebor could see Nadene sitting at a table, looking down into her cup with an unreadable expression. He felt the strange urge to comfort her.

"Neither of you are scholars or mages. Otherwise, you would have recognized my name. I will not hold this against you." Fyr accepted a tea cup from Athtera. "You stand in the presence of Lord Divayth Fyr. I am the most powerful sorcerer in Tamriel, living or dead. This is not a boast. It is a matter of fact. Once, I was the Telvanni Mage-Lord of the tower Tel Fyr on Vvardenfell. I have since outgrown that portentous title."

Fyr went to the side chamber, moving across the tower with the easy agility of a much younger mer. Nadene looked up at him and smiled, something vulnerable and peculiarly young in her expression, and then the door closed.

"Please, seras, feel free to relax." Athtera led them to a couple of chairs near a cluttered alchemy table. She set the steaming cups down on a small table between them.

"You were certainly prepared for company," Gelebor said. "Thank you."

"Divayth knew we would have visitors today," Athtera replied. "But he mustn't have known one of them would be Nerevarine. I've never seen him so excited! Isn't it wonderful?"

Gelebor returned her toothy smile. Despite his worries, the Argonian's good cheer was infectious. Then he noticed for the first time how stiffly Kharjo was sitting.

"Is there something wrong with your tea, serjo?" Athtera asked.

Kharjo leaned forward, his eyes on the door to the side chamber. "Kharjo can get you out of this place. But he must know first: are you being tracked by your master in some way? A magical ring, maybe, or an ankle clasp?"

Gelebor was sure Athtera's shocked expression matched his own. Then he comprehended, and his heart gave a leap.

"Oh. *Oh!*" Athtera cackled. "Divayth always spoke fondly of the Nerevarine, but he never mentioned what gracious company she kept. By the egg, kind Khajiit, I am no slave."

Kharjo merely nodded. If his race could blush, Gelebor was fairly certain he'd be red from ear to ear.

"An ankle clasp." Athtera giggled to herself, walking away. "Now there's an idea..."

"Don't feel embarrassed, my friend." Gelebor squeezed Kharjo's shoulder. "And drink some of this tea. It's damn good."

Kharjo mumbled a curse under his breath and hid his face behind the teacup. Several minutes passed, and they both drained half their cups. Afternoon sunlight streamed through a large circular window stretching across the mycelial ceiling. *He's already looking more alive than he has since we left Raven Rock.*

"I am a fool." Kharjo traced the rim of his cup with one claw. "I insulted the Nerevarine and spit in the face of her friend's kindness with my prying."

"Your intentions are true. And for all we know of this Divayth Fyr, that Argonian very well could have been serving under duress." He fought to keep a note of bitterness from his words. "For all Nadene knows, even. Apparently she hasn't seen this almighty mage in two hundred years. I've seen mer change beyond recognition in much shorter periods of time, twisted by fate or betrayal."

"You are not wrong," Kharjo admitted. He opened his mouth, but then closed it again.

"Something else?" Gelebor asked gently.

"Ah, it's nothing."

"Come now, Kharjo. You should know by now that I won't judge you for speaking freely."

"Well." Kharjo hesitated. "Khajiit just wanted to say that it is admirable, how you have weathered our trek so far."

"Un. Thank you?" Gelebor still didn't quite understand.

"Given your...condition, that is."

"Pardon?"

Kharjo's hands twisted in his lap. "It's just, I'm not sure of how much time you have left."

"I am going to be honest." Gelebor set down his cup. "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"Your sickness. Kharjo assumed you did not speak of it for a reason, and so remained silent himself. Apologies if I have overstepped my bounds."

The corner of Gelebor's mouth turned up. "Sickness?"

"Yes. You are paler than any High Elf I've ever met. Paler than death. And the difference in your manner of living, from our first meeting to our second...your illness must have worsened dramatically, to provoke such a change."

Gelebor laughed, warmth spreading through his chest. With all that had happened the last few days, he'd utterly forgotten that Kharjo had no idea what he was.

"Kharjo is happy to see you are taking it well. Laughter must be the only relief left to you, at this stage."

"Oh, my." Gelebor wiped a tear from his eye. "Kharjo. I'm a Snow Elf."

Kharjo's eyes widened. "By the Twin Moons. This Khajiit has seen them before, during his travels in Skyrim. This is more serious than I feared. How long until you must go below the dirt, and lose your sight?"

"No, no. Those are Falmer. The Betrayed. I'm a *Snow Elf*. Please appreciate the difference."

"Oh. So you are not sick?"

"Decidedly not." Gelebor smiled wearily. "Though if I have to live on Solstheim much longer, I'm not certain my body won't start destroying itself in protest."

"Gah. Kharjo had embarrassed himself once more. Perhaps he should use his head before his tongue."

Before Gelebor could reassure him, the door to the side chamber opened and Lord Fyr emerged with Nadene. She wasn't crying any longer, Gelebor was happy to see, though her face still seemed a bit red. Fyr nodded to them and went to Athtera, who was washing some dishes on the other side of the tower. Nadene came towards Gelebor.

"I'm sorry I left you two alone," she said. "It's just... I thought Divayth Fyr died with Vvardenfell."

"No need to apologize," Kharjo said.

"None at all," Gelebor agreed. Nadene smiled tightly.

"Is it okay if I hold your hand?" She asked, in a tone of voice he'd never heard before. "Seeing Divayth again...I love him, but seeing him again has left me a bit raw."

Love him? Nadene must have noticed him look away, because she immediately shook her head.

"Not in that way, ending. The elf is like a father to me. Without him, I'd have died on Vvardenfell."

"Oh," Gelebor replied, feeling foolish. *It's none of my concern, anyway, who she loves and in what manner.* He took her hand and squeezed it lightly. Two chairs similar to the ones he and Kharjo sat in were floating towards them. Impressively, Fyr seemed to still be engaged in conversation with Athtera while performing this feat. Nadene sat down in the chair that landed next to Gelebor, their hands still clasped.

"Nadene." Kharjo whispered past Gelebor's back, none too quietly. "Did you know Gelebor was a Snow Elf?"

"No kidding?" Nadene faux-whispered back. "I thought he was a vampire. Too bad. All the innocent blood I collected is going to go to waste."

Kharjo took a moment to respond. "This is a joke, yes?"

Gelebor grinned. He felt strangely at peace, in this tower apparently inhabited by the most powerful sorcerer ever to live.

Said sorcerer now approached them with a mischievous glint in his eye. The blue Argonian came with him.

"Athtera tells me you offered to free her from her chains of servitude." Lord Fyr said to Kharjo.

"This is true." Kharjo met his piercing gaze. "Kharjo will not apologize for this. He has heard of

secluded Telvanni in Morrowind who still partake in this most vile of practices."

"No need for an apology. I am pleased to know Nadene's friends are as wise as they are entertaining." Fyr bowed low, his Daedric pauldrons bending fluidly. "This is not my tower. But if it were so, I would offer you a high position in my ranks. It is easy enough to stand up to tyrants when they threaten you. But to attempt to save another, after you've been told of the great power her master wields...you are a rare sort, Kharjo. And please, all of you, call me Divayth. I am the lord of no one, in these times."

"Ah...thank you."

Divayth stood up, pulled Athtera close, and kissed her fiercely.

Gelebor marveled at the anatomical deftness involved, and after a few seconds of watching them, felt a strange twinge of longing. Nadene squeezed his hand tighter and smiled.

"Ah!" Divayth pulled himself away. "Lovely. This is the Argonian who saved me, Nadene. Athtera. No Imperial name. She's never been to the Empire. Fortunate for her, eh?"

"Definitely." Nadene raised her brow. "You said you'd tell me where you've been since...you know what." She glanced at Gelebor. "If you're comfortable talking about it in front of them."

"I would not have bid us leave the side chamber otherwise." Divayth sat down.

"Is it time?" Athtera asked, standing behind him. Divayth was still so tall, even sitting, that only her head and shoulders were visible.

"Not yet." He considered. "After I speak of the Red Year. That is the worst of it. *Certainly* the worst."

"Agreed." Athtera rested her head on his shoulder. Divayth took a deep breath.

"'Twas the fourth of Sun's Dawn. Winter was winding down to an end. Little patches of moss were sprouting on the wet rocks of Azura's Coast. You'd last visited us a couple of months before. Brought me those Akaviri specimens I'd been asking after, and your boyfriend thoroughly embarrassed himself in my Corprusarium."

"I remember," Nadene said, smiling sadly. *Boyfriend?*

"Khajiit begs your pardon," Kharjo spoke, "but he does not know this word...corpusarium?"

"Divayth kept victims of the corpus disease in the caverns below Tel Fyr," Nadene explained. "To try to understand the powers corpus inferred: immortality, and immunity to all other sickness. All in the interest of finding a cure, of course."

"Of course," He affirmed. "Now, if you will let me continue this tale. The sky was clear. As clear as it ever got, anyway. There was no sign of the ruin to come, and altogether the day looked to be a boring one. I was examining one of your blood samples when we felt the earth shake. Some of my more delicate instruments shattered on the ground. I was more furious than concerned, and my daughters tried their best to soothe me. Little did I know that they had already put their plan into motion.

"Beyte was in Vivec when the rogue moon Baar Dau fell on the city, you see. The youngest of my daughters. Buying art supplies or some such. The others felt her die. They knew what was coming. I suspect Alfe was the mastermind behind it all; she was always the sharpest of them. They sat me

down in a chair amidst my ruined experiment and pushed a cup of tea in my hands. I drank deeply, suspecting nothing. I had become too soft, getting fat and lazy in my tower. All I could think about was a conversation I'd had the day before with Yagrum Bagarn."

Nadene interrupted, her eyes shining. "Yagrum. Did he..."

Divayth continued. "I woke up in the Temple of the Divines in Firewatch, the Imperial outpost on the mainland. There was an amulet of Divine Intervention around my neck, and four flowers placed delicately in the pocket of my cloak. The city was just across the Inner Sea from Vvardenfell. Nearly close enough to see the shore. I rushed outside just in time to watch the top of Red Mountain vanish in a cloud of ash. Poison filled the sky. A fireball fell from the heavens, obliterating the temple I'd just left. I tried to Recall to Tel Fyr, but my daughters must have dispelled my marker. Blind with panic, I cast Almsivi Intervention, but I was just teleported further in to the mainland. To Necrom, I believe. City of the Dead. Fitting. If I'd remained in Firewatch, I'd have died with my daughters. The city fell into the sea shortly after my departure."

"Gods, Divayth. I'm sorry."

"It's strange." He stared past them, seeing ghosts. "I hope you'll not begrudge me a moment of vulnerability. In four millenia, I've left behind more people than you will ever know. I always think it will hurt less each time. But alas. The pain is a constant. It merely takes on a different flavor. All four of my daughters burned away with Tel Fyr, as did Yagrum Bagarn, the last living dwarf. As did my work of centuries. As did you, for all I knew."

The last living dwarf? Gelebor opened his mouth to speak, intensely interested, and only the fragility in Divayth's tone stayed his tongue.

"I could not remain in Morrowind. This was not a matter of emotion; the air was thick with death and ash, from Mournhold to Blacklight. I travelled south, to Narsis on the border. For the first time in my life, I found myself sick of Resdayn. I cursed Vivec for letting the rogue moon fall. I cursed myself for missing the signs. I even cursed you, in my weakest moments, for destroying the powers that held Baar Dau in the sky. The sight of refugees streaming into the city was sickening. I crossed into Black Marsh. For nearly two hundred years I remained there."

"Alone?" Nadene asked, without mockery.

"Yes." Divayth leaned back in his chair. Athtera rubbed his shoulders. "I did not heed my own advice. I lived in the deep wetlands, where even the most foolish Argonians feared to tread. In a small hut, sequestered in gloom. In truth I spent little time in Mundus. The mortal world had disappointed me. For years I travelled the planes of Oblivion with reckless abandon. It's a testament to my power that these bitter sojourns did not spell the end."

"Excuse me," Kharjo interrupted. "You say you can travel to Oblivion?"

"Oh, yes. I am the premiere authority on extra-planar travel. My writings are taught the world over." Divayth made a thoughtful sound. "Or, they were. I'm not apprised of the current state of Tamrielic academia."

Nadene asked, "What were you looking for, when you went on these trips?"

"A question I often ask myself. The monsters of Oblivion were all too eager to fall to my sword, yet I divined no grand knowledge from their smoking remnants. Hermaeus Mora tried for decades to ensnare me, but no other Prince took much notice of the old Dunmer rampaging through the planes. Something kept me from going too far, from pushing too deep. An old foolish notion of

self-preservation. Or the thought of what a tongue-lashing I'd receive from Alfe, Beyte, Delte, and Uupse, should we meet in the afterlife."

Occasionally this good sense failed me. I spent almost a year in Coldharbour. Molag Bal's domain. When I finally returned to Black Marsh, my body was a ruin, and twelve different poisons were slowly killing me. I did not have the strength to stand, or the magic to levitate. It seemed to be a fitting conclusion to a life that had gone on for far too long. I closed my eyes and held my daughters' flowers to my breast."

Divayth reached for Athtera's hand on his shoulder. Their fingers intertwined, gray and blue. "I awoke in Athtera's bed a month later. A masterful alchemist, living in a small village nearby. She nursed me back to health. Wouldn't let me return to my hut, after. Said I'd ruin her good work. We started arguing, and you can probably guess the rest. Ten years later, here we stand. It's time, my dear."

She withdrew, squeezing his hand one last time, and walked to a chamber door none of them had yet entered.

"Time for what?" Gelebor asked.

He just grinned. Athtera returned, and in her arms were two Dunmer infants. A dusting of black hair covered their heads. Nadene cried out in delight, and Gelebor could not help but share in her happiness. He'd not seen a baby since the Betrayed had lured him away from the Chantry with one of their own younglings.

"Yours?" Nadene asked, happily accepting one of the infants from Athtera. She cooed softly at the child. Watching her with the baby sent butterflies through Gelebor's stomach.

"Yes. One hundred percent Fyr."

Gelebor was sure he misheard. "Um. How does that work, precisely?"

"The same as it worked for the four daughters I lost. They are born of my flesh. For these two girls, just a fortnight ago. I thought I'd lost the secret to the process, but Athtera has spent a decade helping me rediscover my research. It was fortunate that traces of corpus were left on the flowers my girls left me. More likely Alfe intended it that way. No doubt it was her idea. Not bad for someone born in a jar, eh?"

"Oh...yes."

Kharjo cleared his throat. Gelebor glanced at him.

"May Kharjo..." He cleared his throat again. "May Kharjo hold one of your children? Just for a moment?"

Athtera smiled. "For as long as you wish, kind Khajiit."

Kharjo accepted the small bundle and took a moment to sit back down in his chair. He looked down at the baby's small face, and seemed to go someplace where only he and the child existed. Divayth and Nadene spoke in the background, and Athtera went to fetch more tea, but Kharjo did not look up. Gelebor was almost as enchanted with his friend's reaction as Kharjo was with the child. Eventually Kharjo held the babe close to his chest, with practiced hands, and leaned back with his eyes closed. He rocked softly, murmuring the words to a song in a language Gelebor did not know.

The light from the ceiling window dimmed. Masser and Secundus rose high, bathing them in a pale light. Athtera attended to one of the babies when it began whimpering, but the other slept soundly in Kharjo's arms.

In a moment where conversation lapsed, Gelebor caught Nadene looking down at one of the babies herself, biting her lower lip.

"Don't worry." Gelebor reached for her hand again. "We'll find Habinsinulu."

She didn't respond, but nodded gently, a strange expression on her face.

"The hour grows late," Divayth finally said. "I could talk for hours more. I suspect you three are less capable of such, from what Nadene has told me of your journey. We will speak tomorrow of Vvardenfell. Though the surprising success of my new children will prevent me from joining you personally, I can at least help expedite your voyage. Athtera will show you to the guest room. Please excuse the clutter. Neloth's steward must have been hired during a time of great desperation."

Gelebor followed Athtera and his friends. He'd been given much to think about. *Lord Fyr has to be nearly as old as me, if not more so.* Such a long-lived elf he'd never met, for as long as Gelebor's memory could stretch. Divayth would be old enough to remember when the true Falmer had walked the snows of Skyrim in daylight. Even if he'd never travelled so far west himself, he'd surely know more about the Snow Elves than anyone else Gelebor had ever encountered. *And he spoke of a dwarf...strange that Nadene never mentioned meeting one of the Dwemer.*

He asked her about it, when Athtera closed the door and left them to their sleep. Nadene looked up from her pillow in the bed beside his.

"Oh. Sorry." She shifted closer, and lowered her voice. "After you'd told me you lost your faith...I didn't want to stress you further, ending. Though I've done a poor job so far."

"Why would speaking of dwarves bring me stress?"

"Because he never mentioned the Falmer. Never even spoke the word." Nadene's eyes glowed in the darkness. "Maybe he'd just forgotten. This was thousands of years after your people were thought to be extinct, you know. And Yagrum was a Resdaynian Dwemer, not a Skyrim one. He might never have met a true Snow Elf."

"Oh." Gelebor leaned back into his pillow. "I won't say I'm not dissatisfied with that answer, but I think I understand. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For..." Gelebor fought for the right words. "For considering my feelings, I suppose. Few have ever taken such care."

Nadene didn't respond for a long while, and he assumed she fell asleep. He'd closed his own eyes when she finally spoke again.

"Divayth and Athtera. They seem happy together, don't they?"

"Hmm...yes." Gelebor opened his eyes a sliver. "I'm glad your friend could find new joy, after all he went through."

"Me too." Sheets rustled. She was looking towards him. "Makes you think...maybe there's hope for

elves like you and me. We've been abandoned by time and gods. But perhaps...perhaps we don't need either. I've been thinking about your promise."

"Promise?"

"To take me away from Morrowind, if we survive all this. I think I'd like to go someplace cold."

Gelebor smiled. "By my reckoning, that seems a marvellous plan. Though I have to rule out Skyrim. Unless we stay in the woods and avoid all contact with the local population."

"That's pretty much my go-to, pal."

There was a sigh from the third bed. "Kharjo is delighted that his elf friends are getting along so well. Kharjo wishes to sleep, now."

"Goodnight, Nadene. Apologies, Kharjo."

"Night, Gelebor. Sleep well, cat."

Eternal Embrace

"We know now to survive we must be born anew. Outside, we will appear as though we belong here. Inside, we will carry our truth and our scars." - Diary of Faire Agarwen

The withered book floated through the doorway past Gelebor, already opening to a page covered in utterly indecipherable runes and symbols. The opened tome danced through the still morning air to join the two others levitating before Divayth Fyr. The ancient mer sat nearly motionless in his chair, a roll of kreshweed held tightly between his fingers. On his right knee, he was lightly bouncing a drowsy infant.

Divayth held the kreshweed to his mouth and took a long, slow breath. In front of him, three pages turned, and his sharp eyes flickered to new lines.

"You come from a lost colony," he said, exhaling. The smoke shimmered in the sunlight like void salt. "On one of Skyrim's most distant barrier islands, I think. There are at least a hundred of you there. You wouldn't have survived this long otherwise. Unless your leaders associate with Daedra." Divayth ran his free hand through the baby's thin black hair. "Or perhaps you employ a few particularly gifted sorcerers."

"I'm sorry," Gelebor replied, taking the declaration as a cue to step on to the balcony. "All of that was false. Did Nadene tell you I was a Snow Elf?"

Divayth's brow furrowed, and the books fell a few inches before being suspended in the air again. Gelebor had a feeling not many people in this mer's life had ever told him he was wrong.

"No. Unlike Neloth, I don't need a band of sycophants hovering about to inform me what's in front of my face." Divayth nodded to the chair next to him. The pages turned again. "Sit. Listen, and speak. But slowly. You may be the most interesting thing to happen to me this season. I wish to savor the moment."

Gelebor obeyed. To his surprise, the scent of kreshweed was not overpowering. In fact, it seemed nonexistent.

"A pathetic habit, I'm aware. I've managed to prolong my life for millennia, but no amount of magicka seems capable of staying the ache from my blighted knee." He patted the leg on which his baby softly bounced. "Dremora got me with a Daedric Crescent, about a hundred years ago. Damned near tore the leg off. Sometimes I wish the bastard had finished the job. Then I could've built a new one, rather than resort to this disgusting ritual just to keep myself sane."

"It's fine," Gelebor said. "I can't smell anything, actually."

"Oh. I'm containing the air around my upper body." Divayth exhaled again. "For the baby. You can say hello. Her name is Tyrena."

"Hello, Tyrena. An Argonian name?"

"Hah. Yes." Divayth grinned. "I'd never have pulled off a successful birth without Athtera's assistance. Only right that she got to name one of the little scribes. But enough about me. I'm far more fascinated with you."

"Very well." Gelebor said, tapping his fingers on the arms of his chair. "Err. What do you wish to know?"

"Firstly, I'll require you to settle down. Your back is as stiff as a board." Divayth chuckled. "I have no desire to dissect the first true Falmer I've seen in thousands of years." The pages of his books turned once more.

"You've met others?" Gelebor leaned closer, unable to keep the hope from his voice.

"A long time ago, as I said." Divayth set the remnant of his kreshweed roll down on a small tray. "But it's your turn to speak. You seem quite dismissive of my colony theory. So tell me, Snow Elf. Have you traveled through time, perhaps? Come into contact with an Elder Scroll? Or was it a deal with the Daedra that landed you in the Fourth Era?"

"Again, none of those. I lived through the war between the Snow Elves and the Nords, though I was still a young mer when my race was driven underground and corrupted by the Dwemer."

"You mock me." Divayth's leg stilled, and he glared darkly. "That would make you four thousand years old, if not more so. As old as I am." His books closed and lowered gently to the ground.

"Yes."

"I know the look of four millennia, boy." Gelebor was beginning to feel the fire of Divayth's gaze, and he shifted uncomfortably. "That much time leaves a mark on anyone. But you seem as whole and fresh as a spring comberry. If you're going to attempt to deceive the oldest mer in Tamriel, you might at least be clever about it." Tyrena looked up at her father, eyes filled with tears.

"I speak the truth," Gelebor said, a bit of heat in his voice. "I stood vigil in our Chantry to Auriel. In the Forbidden Vale, a frozen oasis hidden in Skyrim's heartlands. Until the Betrayed came and brought ruin to the Chantry, it was my sacred duty to guide pilgrims through our wayshrines on their way to enlightenment."

"Auriel, you say?" Some of the anger left Divayth, and he went back to bouncing his child before she could begin to cry in earnest. "Hmm. I've never been to Skyrim. By the time I had the opportunity to travel so freely, the only inhabitants I was interested in speaking with were extinct. Do you have any evidence of your claims?"

"No," Gelebor said miserably, and then remembered. "Wait. Yes! I have the ancient texts, that the Dragonborn found. The books are far away, in the College of Winterhold, but I memorized them. They're in my head."

"Ancient texts?" Divayth raised an eyebrow and reached for his discarded kreshweed. "Stored in your head? Marvelous. Are you literate in Cyrodilic or Dunmeris?"

"Pardon?"

"Parchment. Ink, and quill." He stroked Tyrena's hair again while exhaling the smoke. "Can you use them to make words I can read? Or can you just write in Falmeris? I'm eager to learn your language, but I don't expect we have the hours to spare."

"Oh. Yes, I can write Cyrodilic."

"If you would be so kind, go to my writing desk and put down into words whichever of these texts you think I'd be most interested in." Divayth inclined his head towards the open doorway. "I already know your manner of speaking. If the book you hand me came from your own mind instead of one of your long-gone siblings, I will know you as a liar and eject you from this tower."

"What was that?" Athtera appeared in the doorway holding a baby of her own. "You won't be

ejecting any of my guests, Divayth."

"Just a moment, dear." Divayth stood, holding Tyrena at his hip, and ushered Gelebor past his partner. "Let me brew up some formula and prepare you some breakfast, and then I'll explain why I threatened our lovely friend here. Come, now. I've some fresh kwama eggs I think you'd be most interested in..."

Their voices faded away. Gelebor found the writing desk easily enough, in a small well-lit room nearby, and spread out his materials in preparation. His first marks were uncertain and messy, as his hand didn't seem to want to cooperate and his mind approached the task with equal parts reluctance and confusion. *When was the last time I put my thoughts into words?* He'd never had anyone to write letters to. In his time at Nadene's tower he'd had to relearn his sums and equations in order to make records of their stores. Transcribing an ancient Falmer text was an entirely different beast.

Several sheets of parchment were wasted before Gelebor was satisfied with his first page. Fortunately, the inkwell seemed to refill itself whenever he wasn't looking. He bent his head to the work, scarcely looking up to note the passage of time. Finished pages were deposited in two neat piles to the left of his elbow. Before too long Gelebor's hand began to cramp, but he stubbornly pressed on.

Tel Mithryn woke up around him. The door to the guest room opened in the main chamber, and he heard a groan of irritation.

"You need some blasted shutters on that roof, Divayth!"

"Take it up with Neloth. I can't make any alterations until I'm certain of his death. Now stop wailing like a nix hound and come drink your tea..."

Gelebor blew the ink dry on another completed page and slid it into his pile. He was gladdened by how easily the words spilled from his mind to the parchment, after all the years that had passed. The Dragonborn hadn't been able to read the texts himself before bringing them to the College of Winterhold for translation, but he'd allowed Gelebor to look over them in the Vale before he and his vampiric companion departed. *I could likely go to the College myself and ask for some copies, should I ever have need of them.* Gelebor rarely thought of his future, but seeing Lord Fyr and Athtera's life together had kindled an unfamiliar flame in his heart. *Perhaps someday I'll have a place to keep books.*

Several minutes passed. The door behind him opened, but Gelebor didn't look up from his work.

"Divayth have you writing down your life story?" Nadene asked. She put a steaming mug down on the corner of the desk, as far as possible from his parchment. Gelebor glanced at her. Nadene was wearing a soft blue dress with decorative embroidery along the seams. She must have borrowed it from Athtera, as it hung a bit loosely on her. It was strange to see Nadene in something other than her glass armor or leather traveling clothes. *Strange, but not altogether unwelcome.*

"Something to that effect. I'm making a copy of an old Snow Elf text."

"Oh. I see." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "You want to do this, right? Sometimes Divayth can forget we aren't all as formidable as he is. If remembering is too painful for you..."

"It's quite fine." Gelebor set down his quill. "The text in question isn't a particularly emotional work."

"Your people had emotional works?" Nadene rested her hip against his desk. "I figured they were all like you. All stoic and polite, hiding all their emotions behind flawless alabaster skin."

"Not so flawless these days. And I do feel things, Nadene. Otherwise I would still be standing alone before a Wayshrine, praying at the sky."

"Of course." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm not very good at this. Having friends, and all."

"Think nothing of it." Gelebor rubbed his forehead. "There was one record. Brought me to tears, in front of the Dragonborn. A diary written by Faire Agarwen. A companion of the Snow Prince. She was beloved to the Falmer, even to the secluded mer of the Chantry. This woman survived the war and took refuge underground with the dwarves, like so many did. Faire was betrayed by the Dwemer. And by Auriel. Sometimes I dream that I was with her and the others, when they lost their sight to the poisoned fungi. I wonder if it would have been better, in the end. At least they had each other, in their twisted new lives."

"Do you think there's any hope for them?" Nadene put a hand on his shoulder. He stiffened for a second, surprised, and then relaxed.

"I don't know. They seem to have improved somewhat since the beginning. They keep livestock, fashion weapons and tools, practice magic. The Dragonborn even told me the Falmer in Blackreach keep human slaves, if that can be said to be a sign of development. In truth, I don't really like to think about them."

"I'll leave you to your work." Her hand withdrew.

"Nadene?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you." Gelebor looked back at her, and offered a weary smile. "For checking up on me."

"It's...it's no problem." Nadene returned the smile, somewhat weakly, and opened the door. She paused for a moment. "Listen. We need to talk later, okay?"

"About Vvardenfell?"

"No. Divayth has already told me what we'll need for the journey. I've been preparing the ingredients." Nadene drummed her fingers on the door. "About...something else."

"Certainly. I look forward to it."

Before the next hour came, Gelebor was finished. He gathered up the two neat bundles of parchment and emerged into the sunlit main chamber, wincing slightly. Infants were burbling somewhere in the direction of the kitchen, and he heard Nadene laughing with Athtera.

Divayth was in much the same spot on the balcony, minus the baby, the books and the kreshweed. He was staring out at Solstheim, the caps of distant mushrooms just visible above the ashy haze. This side of Tel Mithryn faced away from the sea, so the horizon was empty. Gelebor did not miss the sight of Red Mountain.

"I've finished," Gelebor said, not wanting to sneak up on him. *As if I could, even if I wished to. Nadene is the most powerful mage I've ever come across, and I suspect this wizard wields ten times her power.*

"Two books?" Divayth asked, his eyes lighting up as he turned his head.

"No." Gelebor handed over the bundles. "One copy in Falmeris, one in Cyrodiilic. I had to do it that way regardless, to make sure I got the translation correct. I'm no scholar."

"Oh, splendid. If you're trying to get on my good side, you're doing a fine job. Please, sit."

Gelebor did so, and watched as Divayth delicately placed the books on his lap.

"*Touching the Sky?*" Divayth ran his long fingers across the title text. He flipped through the first pages, his sharp eyes dancing from word to word. "Beautiful. This is a fine gift you've given me, Gelebor. And with the Falmeris translation, as well...I could spend weeks poring over every letter."

"I'm glad you're satisfied."

"More than satisfied. And please, let me return the favor."

"You don't owe me anything," Gelebor said. "You're already helping us get to Vvardenfell."

Divayth waved his hand. "A simple ritual, though a bit of a tedious one. Costs me nothing but time. But I noticed your interest earlier, when I mentioned that I'd met some of your kind before..."

"Ah." Gelebor swallowed. "I assume they're long dead now."

"Certainly." Divayth closed the book. "It was thousands of years ago, but still long after the true Falmer were thought to be extinct. Back when my skin was sunlight instead of ash. The closest I ever got to Skyrim was an isolated island to the northwest of Winterhold. This was when the city was still the capital, but even then none of the natives dared to sail very far into the treacherous Sea of Ghosts. Even with my extraordinary powers, I still found the journey challenging. I'd stopped on what I thought to be a particularly sunken glacier when I sensed movement nearby. Four bone-white elves rushed from the darkness, wielding horker spears, clad in garments of heavy fur and wool. They attacked my campsite."

"You killed them?"

"Of course not. Do you take me for some bloodthirsty Redoran? I paralyzed the savages and kept one to study. The others I sent back into the night, their heads filled with happy illusions of a successful hunt."

"What of the captured one? Did you manage to communicate?"

"In a sense." Divayth leaned back, stretching his arms. "After the first annoyingly violent day had passed, the mer seemed open to more diplomatic forms of discourse. But our languages were hopelessly disparate. Perhaps you could have understood him, but not I. Fortunately the silence gave me ample opportunity to study the mer's physiology. The elves was remarkably similar in appearance to depictions of the ancient Falmer. They maintained their appearance far better than their subterranean counterparts. Not surprising, considering they received adequate daylight and a more balanced diet. I could not make a true comparison, of course, until I met you yesterday."

"You're saying he looked like me?" Gelebor pushed down the little flames of hope. *Even if what Divayth says is true, the elves he met are long dead.*

"If millennia had not passed, I would have thought you to be from the same island." Divayth tilted his head. "I released the elf after several days and set sail once more. Though I tried to find the island again on my return journey, it seemed to have vanished entirely into the mists. I only met a

small group of these mer. I had no way of knowing if they were a fraction of a much larger population, or the last struggling remnants. My captured specimen seemed well fed. That's all I can say."

"Well, thank you." Gelebor rubbed his forehead. "Though I'm not sure what use this information is to me." He thought of his strange dreams, of the Snow Elves on the shore. *Was I being shown the same elves Divayth speaks of?*

"I will tell you: it is useless. Unless you intend to die cataloging every island in the Sea of Ghosts. The waters were treacherous enough before an entire capital of large buildings slid underneath them. Even if these lost Falmer survived to the time of the Great Collapse, they were undoubtedly wiped out by the subsequent tidal waves."

"I suppose you're right."

"Stow your unhappiness for now, my boy." Divayth glanced back as the tower door opened. Nadene stepped out, wearing her glass armor and bow. She was holding Gelebor's mace. "You'll be on Vvardenfell soon. That will give you reason enough to weep, without thinking of your long-dead brothers and sisters."

"Speaking of Vvardenfell," Nadene interrupted. She stepped up behind them. "Can we leave, now? I've gathered everything you need for your ritual."

"In such a hurry to be free of my hospitality?"

"My granddaughter has been taken, Divayth." Her fingers tightened on Gelebor's chair. "Too much time has passed already. I want to move now, before another ash storm hits and grounds us here."

"Very well." Divayth stood, and the two Falmer texts floated away. He yawned and ambled to the railing. "I originally came here to compare my own research to Neloth's. On the subject of Heart Stones, specifically. Little pieces of Red Mountain, blown to Solstheim during the eruption. I'll need one of these stones, a particularly powerful specimen, to complete the ritual and teleport you to Vvardenfell."

"Hmm. Sounds promising enough, I suppose." Nadene asked. "From where do these stones derive their power?"

Divayth turned, his long white hair twisting in the wind. "I thought you'd ask. These molten rocks laid next to the Heart of Lorkhan for centuries upon centuries. Irony, isn't it?"

"Yes. Great."

"I don't quite understand," Gelebor said.

"The Nerevarine prophecies culminated in the destruction of the Heart of Lorkhan at Nadene's hands, so that the sorcerers of Morrowind could no longer wield its power in their false crusades." Divayth smiled. "Now the Nerevarine will use that same power to return to Vvardenfell, centuries later."

"Spectacular," Nadene grumbled. "Poetic, even. You can write a book about it. Tell me where this blasted stone is, so we can be on our way."

Divayth nodded to the horizon. "A reaver stronghold sitting on the shoreline, to the northeast. A few hours walk. I was going to wipe them out myself before the babies came upon us. I suspect they believe the Heart Stone to be a valuable gem of some sort."

"Is it not?" Gelebor stood and joined Nadene. She smiled at him for a moment, her expression a bit strained, and handed over the mace. He clipped it to his belt.

"No merchant in Raven Rock would buy one. The stone is useless to anyone who doesn't know how to utilize its power. So, to anyone but Neloath and I, for the most part."

"Alright." Nadene crossed her arms. "So we kill a bunch of pirates, grab the Heart Stone, and then we can go to Vvardenfell?"

"Not quite. As I told your friend earlier, the ritual is relatively simple but a bit tedious. I'll need about a day to prepare the Stone for the process, and you'll need to return to Raven Rock in the meantime to gather a few ingredients for me. I assume you have a Recall marker there?"

"Yes." Nadene groaned. "I thought you said this would be a quick way to the island!"

"Quicker than a ship," Divayth said, ignoring her frustration. "Cheaper, too. But you should hurry to the reavers. I have no desire to stay long in this tower, either. I've stolen the spores I required from Neloath. Athtera and I will soon return to Black Marsh with our brood, and Tel Fyr will rise again. The first Telvanni tower in the land of Argonia."

"I'm happy for you." Nadene grabbed Gelebor's hand and pulled him to the railing with urgency. "I hope it all works out."

"Travel safe," Divayth advised. He returned to the tower without looking back at them.

Gelebor was getting used to the sensation of spells washing over him, and so wasn't overly surprised when he and Nadene began floating over the balcony.

"What about Kharjo?"

"He needs the rest. If he's coming with us to Vvardenfell, he'll need his full strength. The fight yesterday was rough on him. Besides, we're just fetching a rock." Nadene guided their descent down the length of the main tower and past Neloath's walls. They landed softly just outside the boundaries of Tel Mithryn. The haze of the morning had cleared, and the sky above was blue and empty of clouds. It was a good day for travel.

They shared a comfortable silence during their trek along the coast. Gelebor was still chewing over Divayth's story, and trying to decide whether it affirmed the truth of his dreams. The Snow Elves in the vision had seemed to live on a temperate shore, not one that could be found in the freezing Sea of Ghosts.

But they could have migrated, certainly, and would have been forced to if they had wanted to survive the Great Collapse of Winterhold. Elder Othreloth had once told him that Azura spoke to the most loyal of her servants on Vvardenfell, and warned them to flee the island before Red Mountain's doom. Could Auriel have provided a similar warning to the last conclave of the race once most beloved to him? *If so, would it have been too much trouble to kick a damned map my way?*

Waves heavy with collected ash pushed and pulled at the thin gray beach. They walked just beyond their farthest reach, so the soft rhythmic pounding filled Gelebor's ears. It was not unpleasant. He had an odd fondness for the ocean, perhaps because he'd been deprived of the sea for so many years.

"What did you and Divayth talk about?" Nadene asked. They kept a brisk pace, but his legs were so much longer than hers that he had little trouble keeping up.

Gelebor hesitated. *Will she mock my hope, as she mocked Auriel before I lost my faith?*

"If you don't mind sharing."

"He told me of some Snow Elves he met thousands of years ago." He kicked a seashell into the oncoming waves. "A pointless story. They've been dead for so long now."

"Oh." Nadene glanced at him, squinting in the sunlight. "I've never known Divayth to provide useless information. He's usually not the sentimental kind."

"Then why share such an anecdote, when I can never hope to act on it?"

She shrugged. "Better an old story from a friend than a vision from a god. At least Divayth has no ulterior motives beyond his curiosity, in your case at least. He's given you more now than Auriel ever has."

"I suppose that's not wrong."

The silence returned until Nadene stopped their advance with a raised hand. She pointed down the shore.

"I don't see anything," Gelebor admitted.

"The sand is disturbed along the waterline," Nadene said, crouching low. He followed her lead.

They crept along the beach, hiding behind the low dunes. A couple of minutes later, they reached the scattered sands. There were footprints from heavy boots, and a large circular imprint beside them.

"B'vek," Nadene murmured. "That's from a bucket, most likely. If they're bringing seawater up for purification, they must have a mage."

"That does not bode well," Gelebor agreed. He was acutely aware of his lack of armor.

"I'd wager their tower is just beyond the beach. We'll probably see it once we clear the dunes."

It was as Nadene said. They moved further down the shore a distance before carefully sneaking inland at a spot where several large mushrooms hid their ascent. To the west, a citadel of ancient stone and steel rose above the low hills of Solstheim. Distant figures moved across the walls and ramparts, too calculated in their movements to be ashspawn and too tall to be rieklings. *No doubt about it. These are Divayth's reavers.*

"What's our plan?"

"First, we get closer. I want to know how many of these s'wits we're dealing with."

They approached their adversaries slowly, scurrying from the cover of one mushroom to another. It was a strange thing, Gelebor thought. Despite all the time that had passed, this would be the first time he and Nadene entered battle together willingly, without being forced into action by some approaching threat. Her presence by his side was a surprising comfort.

Finally, they were upon the citadel. Gelebor sat with his back against a boulder while Nadene peered at the towering fortress from the side. She grabbed his hand and squeezed.

"Feeling nervous?" He asked.

"No. Come look with me."

Gelebor obeyed, bending his back at a painful angle to stay hidden. He had to get quite close to Nadene to match her gaze, but she didn't seem to mind. She wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close. Gelebor swallowed. They looked up at the citadel together.

"Watch," Nadene whispered, and cast a spell. At first Gelebor thought the incantation had failed. Nothing seemed to change. And then glowing shapes of crimson appeared like fireflies at dusk, one by one, all along the watchtowers and through the thick walls of stone. The shapes moved, and the red energy moved with them. Gelebor was enchanted.

"What is this?"

"Detect Life. Won't tell us if that mage has any Daedra around, though. I count thirty six reavers."

Gelebor looked again, trying to ignore the pleasant weight of Nadene's arm. "Yes. I get the same. Seems like quite a lot, given we're only two."

"Yes. Too many for a straight battle." She grabbed his shirt between her fingers and rubbed the thin cloth. "Especially with you without armor. Damn. We'll have to be clever. It'll take longer, but I think it's the only way."

"Oh?"

"I have an idea." Nadene bit her lip, looking at him. Her face was so close Gelebor could see the reflection of his face in her large red eyes. "You're not going to like it."

They left most of her glass armor and all their weapons in a neat pile behind the boulder. Gelebor wore the bracers, the only piece they could adjust to fit him; Nadene claimed it added a certain flair to the presentation.

They approached the portcullis. She walked slightly ahead in the simple clothes she wore under her armor. Gelebor swore the reavers must be able to hear the frantic beating of his heart. *This is a horrible plan.*

The first reaver spotted them, and a piercing whistle split the air. More whistles echoed down the shore as his companions answered. *Oh, good. They're coordinated.*

"Stop, you lot!" A Dunmer in tattered bonemold armor aimed a crossbow at them from above the portcullis. "Drop your swords."

"I come unarmed, good sir," Gelebor responded. "With a business proposition for your leader."

"A what?" The bandit grinned. "You've come to the wrong part of Solstheim, n'wah."

More reavers joined him, cursing and spitting and aiming their own weapons. Gelebor didn't like the way they were looking down at Nadene.

"What've you caught, Senso?" A slender Nord leered at her.

"Hands off, ye bastards." Senso pushed the others back. "I saw them first. They're claimed."

"If any harm comes to me or my property," Gelebor warned. "Your master will be quite displeased."

"Maybe I oughta take my chances." He reached for a lever. "You look like a rich fetcher. I bet those silk pockets are full of clinky coin."

"If you allow me to meet with your leader, you and all your friends will have more wealth than you could ever imagine."

Senso's fingers hesitated on the lever. "How's that figure? I could just kill ya now and take all the gold for meself."

"Err, no. This future wealth is theoretical."

"So it's not real, then?" Senso frowned.

"It is real. It's just...okay, say that you loot one hundred gold off of my corpse. But if I can give you that same gold today, and then that same amount a fortnight from now..."

"How long's a fortnight?"

"Two weeks," a heavily armored Orc at his side offered.

"Yes." Gelebor forced a smile. "So, if you allow me to meet with your master now, at the end of the month you will have far more gold than if you had simply killed me today. And if I'm lying, you can kill me anyway and take the gold. And the fine Dunmer woman I brought your leader as a gift."

Senso appeared to ponder for a moment. Gelebor risked a glance at Nadene. She was affecting a countenance of weary resignation, but he could tell she was watching the vagabonds closely.

"Fine." He'd shoved away most of the others, and they were slowly returning to their posts. He'd evidently convinced them the two elves at the portcullis were no threat. "I'll take ya to Netchbreaker. But you'd best keep your word, or the lady's in for a world of hurt after I'm done with you." He pulled the lever, and the iron bars slid up.

Gelebor pushed Nadene forward, to help maintain the illusion. He dearly hoped the glare she gave him over her shoulder was for the same purpose. They passed beneath the stone walls. After a moment, the bars lowered back in place. *We're in it, now. No escape. No turning back.* He steeled his heart, grabbed Nadene's arm, and stepped forward.

In the Depths of Elven Hearts

In my dreams, a tall figure in a golden mask spoke to me. "Lord Nerevar Indoril, Hai Resdaynia! Long forgotten, forged anew! Three belied you, three betrayed you! One you betrayed was three times true! Lord Voryn Dagoth, Dagoth Ur, steadfast liegeman, faithful friend, bids you come and climb Red Mountain! Beneath Red Mountain, once again, break your bonds, shed cursed skin, and purge the n'wah from Morrowind!" - Journal of Nadene Othryn, 3E 427

Senso met them at the bottom of the steps. Up close, the stench of the reaver was near unbearable. Senso led them to an armored door and pushed them inside. The general aroma of the citadel was not much of an improvement. Gelebor wrinkled his nose as they walked through the fortress.

"A little too raw for you, mate?" Senso snorted. "Ye ain't dealt with our kind before, by the looks of it. I hope you got a good story for Netchbreaker. He's not one to play around with."

"As long as he likes gold, I think I'll do just fine."

Several reavers tried to accost them as they passed, and one even slipped out of a dark corner and slid his hand around Nadene's waist. Gelebor seized the Dunmer's arm and wrenched it backward. The elf cried out and stumbled away.

"Ha!" Senso smirked. "Maybe you ain't so innocent after all, sera. Haven't seen a limb broken like that in too long."

"Just tell them to keep away from her," Gelebor said, his shoulders stiff. The sudden fury that had risen in him was unfamiliar. Nadene didn't look back.

It was strange, putting on a face not one's own. He channeled what he could recall of the Altmer he'd met in Skyrim: haughty, apathetic, superior.

They ascended a long staircase leading to the top of one of the citadel towers. Inside, a muscular Dunmer wearing the skull of a werebear counted coins from a satchel. The Heart Stone was lying on the edge of his desk, glowing softly.

Gelebor had once wandered into a skooma den by mistake, during his years in Skyrim. The air had been sickly sweet and fragrant with the illicit spice. Netchbreaker's den had much the same aroma.

"What's this?" Netchbreaker asked.

"Some rich n'wah," Senso replied. "Says he has a preposition for ya. And a gift."

"Does he, now." Netchbreaker leaned back in his chair and swept the coins aside. He fastened his gaze on Gelebor. There was a blankness in his countenance, but it was not the empty stare of a simpleton. There was simply nothing behind the mer's eyes. "Leave."

Senso obeyed. For an eternity, Netchbreaker studied them. He seemed particularly interested in Nadene.

"This elf is your gift." Gelebor sensed it was not a question. "A valuable token, meant to stay my urge to simply murder you and rob your stinking body. How old?"

"Um." Gelebor studied the back of Nadene's head, his mind racing.

"You don't know the age of the slave you offer?"

"She's forty seven." Reasonably young for a Dunmer, he thought, but not too young.

"Hmm. Perhaps." Netchbreaker stood up, his head nearly brushing the ceiling. He came towards them, looking over Nadene all the way. "Lines at the corners of her eyes. And speaking of which..." He stroked her face, rubbing his large thumb over her eyelids. Gelebor restrained the urge to clench his fists. "How long has she been a slave?"

"Mere days." Gelebor count count on one hand the number of beings he'd met that were taller than him. This mer was the mightiest of those.

"I can tell." Netchbreaker pinched her cheek. Gelebor wished he could see her face, to know if he should intervene. "There's fire, there. An ardor of passion. Breaking her in will be half the fun."

"That bodes well for our future business arrangement," Gelebor said. He didn't have to fabricate his icy smile.

"What is it you propose?"

"It's simple." Gelebor fought to maintain eye contact. "You often raid settlements nearby and ships passing through the area. I merely ask that you keep an eye out for women such as this. I'm in the business of moving bodies, and I can promise you a fortune if you keep me well supplied."

"Oh?" Netchbreaker made a thoughtful sound. "Why don't I just take this little mer, kill you, and sell any beauties I capture myself? I already have to share my profits with the fodder downstairs."

"You don't have the means." Nadene had prepared him for this question. "Few on Solstheim are wealthy enough to traffic in flesh. But I have contacts in the underworld of many nearby cities, including Blacklight, Port Telvannis, and Windhelm. If you went within ten leagues of their ports, your ships would be at the bottom of the Inner Sea in minutes. Even in disguise, you would attract attention. My way is the only way."

"What you say..." Netchbreaker ambled back to his desk, running a hand through Nadene's hair as he passed. "May hold some truth. But what if I don't care? I've had a run of good luck recently. Acquired this crimson gem, for one. I'd wager it's worth seasons of the work you're offering."

"If you don't care for the deal," Gelebor said, as sharply as he dared, "I'm sure one of your competitors on the island would be eager to earn all this gold in your place."

"Maybe they would. Tell me, what part of Alinor do you come from?"

"I was actually born in Skyrim. I've never even seen the isles, to speak truly."

"I see. I spent my own youth on the streets of Blacklight."

"Ah." Gelebor fought to keep the panic from his voice. "It's much changed from those days, I would imagine."

Nadene held her left hand behind her back and crossed two of her fingers. The message was clear, but there was no painless way of leaving this conversation. He was beginning to see that they had been on trial the second they stepped into the room.

"Oh, I don't know." Netchbreaker leaned back, his chair creaking in protest, and rolled a septim between his fingers. "Some things never change. Do you know Gilnos Gorvethi?"

"I...I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"Understandable enough. The Camonna Tong don't often deal with outsiders."

Nadene's hand went into a fist, the knuckles whitening. Gelebor took a step back, pulling her along. Netchbreaker's eyes followed.

"The Redoran councilor of Solstheim," he said, almost bored. "What's his name?"

"The First Councilor is Lleril Morvayn, and the second is Adril Arano."

"Aye." Netchbreaker let the coin slip from his fingers and roll across his desk. "Perhaps we can do business after all. Just one last question."

"Yes?"

"Tell me the color of the Blacklight docks."

Gelebor swallowed. The corner of Netchbreaker's mouth turned up, and he began to stand.

Nadene cursed and thrust forth her hand. The Heart Stone flew off the desk faster than Gelebor's eyes could track. Halfway through its trajectory, it paused in the air. A figure cloaked in black stepped out of the corner next to Netchbreaker. His own hand was raised.

She released her telekinetic hold and reached back for Gelebor's arm. He felt the Recall spell pulling them away, and then Netchbreaker's desk was flying through the air towards them.

He was still dizzy when a giant hand pulled him to his feet.

"Come, now." Netchbreaker scolded. "Did you truly think I'd meet with you alone? You don't get to stand on the backs of so many worthless bandits without learning a few tricks along the way. Make sure that bracelet is tight, Gamlen."

"'Tis, sir." He squeezed the enchanted clamp around Nadene's wrist. There was a cut above her eye, and blood ran down her face. "This 'un seems to promise excitement. Can I have her?"

"Not yet." Netchbreaker grabbed Gelebor's chin, and held his face up to the torchlight. "These little elves have engaged my attention. Why would they walk into a camp of dozens of outlaws? All for that red stone? Must be worth more than you suspected."

"Torture, then?" Gamlen licked his lips. Nadene glared at them both in silence and Gelebor resolved to follow her example.

"Soon enough. For now, throw them in the pit. Spread the word: the pretty mer belong to me. If I catch any of those fetchers down below interfering, they'll be decorating my saddle by dawn tomorrow."

"As ya command," Gamlen said, and bowed. To Gelebor's dismay, the scrawny mage then tied their hands behind their backs and blindfolded them. *We should have taken a better measure of these reavers.* Gamlen led them in darkness down stinking corridors. Occasionally Gelebor heard laughter or muttered comments, but for the most part the other bandits seemed to keep their distance. Obviously they had more respect for Gamlen than for Senso.

They walked for so long a time that Gelebor was sure they must have left the citadel, but not once had he felt the sunlight on his face. Gamlen stopped. The world around them was nearly silent, but

for the gentle pull of air in an uncertain direction.

"Is this the pit, then?" Gelebor asked.

"Naw." There was a smile in Gamlen's voice. "This is."

He pushed, and Gelebor fell through the open air. Without free hands to brace himself, the landing was rough. He rolled over and coughed, trying in vain to banish the ash his impact had sent up. Nadene landed on top of him.

"Sorry!"

Gelebor spent five minutes trying to catch his breath. There was ash all in his hair, and he was almost certain Nadene had broken one of his ribs with her fall. *Maybe it'll pierce one of my lungs, and I can be free of this madness at last.*

"It's...fine." It hurt to breathe, now that he was capable. He wriggled around until he was sitting up, and searched the darkness for Nadene. Gamlen had closed the trap door after pushing her in, leaving them without light. "You okay?"

"Yes."

"Your face." Gelebor shook his head to try to clear some of the filth away. "Hurt."

"It's fine." She opened her eyes, so he could finally see where she was sitting. "Head wounds bleed a lot."

"Sorry. My fault." He laid his head back down and took a measured breath. The pain wasn't as bad, now. "Bad acting."

"Not the worst I've seen. There was this Breton acrobat I met in the Foreign Quarter once, Marcel Maurard. I had to either kill him or find him a job. He was lucky Crassius Curio had such low standards."

He was surprised. "You're not mad?"

"It was *my* plan." Nadene sighed. "I should've been the slaver. You just can't pull off darkness and deception, no offense."

"Um...none taken. I suppose I'd have been a convincing slave, if my kin are any indication. Aren't you upset at the time we're wasting?"

"I don't know." A minute passed. "Giving into despair hasn't helped before. Didn't help Divayth, when he was dying alone in his swamp hut. Won't help Habi, wherever she is."

"I suppose you're right. So how are we getting out of this?"

"I was planning on kicking back and waiting for Kharjo."

"Nearly forty bandits, though..." Gelebor sat up again. "Even for all three of us, that would be a challenge. Will Lord Fyr come?"

"No. The way he looked at his new children...he won't leave them alone on this blighted island, not even to save me."

"It seems the onus has fallen on us, then."

"Seems so."

They stared at each other in the darkness. His eyes were adjusting, and he could nearly see the blood drying on her face. It made Gelebor sick, for reasons he could not put into words.

"Earlier, when I was transcribing. You said you wanted to speak to me about something?"

"I had a different place in mind for that conversation."

"Here seems as good as any." He nodded his chin towards the trap door. "Either of us could be taken away at any moment to be tortured or killed. We might not get another chance."

"Oh." Nadene's voice wavered, or perhaps it was Gelebor's imagination. She leaned back, face softening, and it was as if he could see her shields slipping away. "Well. I've been in situations like this before, but I've usually had my magic at least. This could be the end of us, yes."

"Would that make you sad? To have a conclusion, after all this time?"

"I'm not sure. Sometimes...sometimes I feel I've lived too long. And some part of me has always known that my end would be violent. Slipping away in the night, warm in bed, surrounded by friends and family...that's not the way you and I will go, Gelebor."

"I know. I've often felt that way, living in the shadow of the Betrayed. And Auriel must want me to die on some hot-blooded crusade, seeing as how he has withdrawn all other options. Perhaps watching his last true child fall to the blades of the corrupted would bring him pleasure, somehow."

"Not all other options, surely." Nadene shifted closer to him. "Have you considered...the alternative?"

"More times than you could imagine." Gelebor smiled tightly. "I'd tell you something in me wanted to keep fighting, but in truth I'm just terrified that what comes after won't be an improvement."

"Yes." She stared into the darkness. "And I'm frightened that wherever I end up, they'll be waiting. Vivec, Almalexia, Sotha Sil...Voryn Dagoth. I'm not sure where dead gods go. But I never want to find out. And...I don't want to leave Habi on her own in this world. B'vek, I should never have let her return to Vvardenfell..."

"I'm sorry. It's not your fault, you know. Turn around. Let's try to undo these binds."

They shuffled around awkwardly on the ashy ground until they were back to back. Gelebor could feel her fingers, and the tight rope around her wrists. The magicka-draining clamp pushing against her binds made them difficult to work with. Several minutes passed.

"What I wanted to talk about." Nadene's voice was measured. "I kinda have to go back a little while. To when you discovered Habi's letter, the night the tower burned down."

"Yes?"

"The real reason I was so mad." She made a frustrated sound. "Damn. I'm not good at this sort of stuff, so please...don't interrupt. When most people see me, they don't really see *me*. The Dunmer in Raven Rock, Divayth, Kharjo. Even Habi, sometimes. They see my face and they think Nerevarine. Nerevar the Captain. Born on a certain day to uncertain parents, and so on and so forth. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"But you. You were sheltered from the world for so long, that even with all the clues you didn't know what I was. I was just a woman living in a strange house. You knew nothing about Nerevar, or the prophecies. No one has looked at me like you do since I walked out of the Cavern of the Incarnate with Moon-and-Star on my finger. So when I saw you reading the letter...I thought everything would change. Our little charade out of time would be over, and you'd start treating me like everyone else does. I was so upset that I ruined our relationship myself before you could have the chance. So...I just wanted to say again, that I'm sorry. And I wanted to ask you a question."

"I've already forgiven you." His fingers paused their work. "What's your question?"

"After all that's happened, all we've been through, and all you've learned about me." Her free hand wrapped around his wrist. "Am I still just Nadene?"

"Undoubtedly." Gelebor smiled. "Perhaps that's blasphemy, on an island of Morrowind. But I care little what Azura thinks. May my twilights be cursed until the end of time, if it means I can make you happy."

Nadene laughed, and pulled her hands free. The clamp was still tight around her wrist, but they could worry about that in a moment. She pulled him to his feet, nearly falling over, but Gelebor steadied her in time.

"You don't know how long I've been waiting for someone to say that to me," Nadene said. She reached for his face, and he lowered his chin to feel her calloused fingers. "I...I had a boyfriend on Vvardenfell. He died saving his tribe's children from the flames. I thought, for a long time, that part of me burned away with him."

"There have been no others since then?"

She shook her head. "Sometimes I'd hire local Dunmer to assist me at the tower, but none of them usually stayed longer than a week. Unlike you, they knew of the Nerevarine. They'd go snooping around where they shouldn't, and I'd have to teleport them back to Raven Rock. Few even took the care to speak my real name, after they learned what I was."

"I wouldn't be able to handle that level of attention, especially for so many years."

"Have you ever loved, Gelebor?"

"My brother, Vyrthur. A few of my comrades in arms. But that's a different kind of love, I think."

"I think so, too." She raised her brow. "So does that mean you've never..."

"Well." Gelebor's jaw tightened. "The adventurers that came upon my Wayshrine...some were curious. I was lonely. You can guess the rest."

"I see. Did you love any of them, in the way Divayth loves Athtera?"

"No." He stared past her shoulder, going to a different time. "It was difficult to form attachments to people I would be burying in days or hours."

"That's terrible." Nadene chewed her lip. "I've told you what you mean to me. But I want to know what I'm supposed to be to you. Losing Auriel must have left a scar. When I turned my back on Azura, after the Red Year, I felt your pain."

"I'm just doing my best to forget him."

"I just..." She sighed. "I can't be his replacement. You know? I'm not a god, endling. I'm just an old woman with a fucked up sense of the world. I don't want a follower, a servant, or a slave. This needs to be a partnership. Equals."

"I agree."

"So what do I need to change to make that happen?" She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Because what we've been doing isn't healthy. You tiptoe around me like I'm a cliff racer with the blight."

"Very well." Gelebor looked away. "I'll speak truly. The memory of that last night in your tower haunts me. When you sent me away, with so little warning and for so little reason..."

"Gelebor-"

"Hush. I know you've apologized more than once. But that is not enough. I can't be afraid to say what I feel, or us being together...it won't work. You have to promise. Promise you'll never abandon me like that again."

"I promise." Nadene grabbed his hand. "No, I swear. I'm so sorry I did that to you. Know that my words that night were born of fear, not hatred."

"Thank you for promising." He met her eyes, and pleasant shivers went down his spine. "I must admit that I...I'm rather fond of you, Nadene."

"Oh, my." She fanned herself. "Such lecherous talk!"

Despite Nadene's levity, he could see the tears at the corners of her eyes. Gelebor knew it was no small feat for this woman to lay her heart bare to him. His own emotions felt raw, like a wound laid bare. He wiped away the wetness with his thumb, and withdrew a handkerchief from his noble shirt to gently clean the blood from her face.

"Thank you." There was a new intensity in Nadene's voice. She looked up at him, her eyes bright. "I'm quite fond of you as well, you know."

"I've had my suspicions."

"So. I've been thinking."

"You continue to impress," Gelebor dared.

She punched his shoulder. "I've been thinking that we'll still have to spend another day on Solstheim, even after we bring the Heart Stone to Divayth. We'll need to return to Raven Rock for supplies anyway, and to pick up your fitted armor, and..."

"And?"

"I think that stupid Redoran formal dinner is tomorrow evening, and Arano and Morvayn won't let me get away with skipping it if I'm in the city. So I was wondering. You know." Nadene fidgeted. "Are you really going to make me ask?"

"Of course I'll go to dinner with you, miss Othryn. What an honor."

"Thanks. I didn't want to face down all those Grand Council bloodsuckers on my own. I'm going to

invite Kharjo too, though I doubt he'll even want to come." She grinned. "But who knows. We might even enjoy ourselves."

"I can hardly wait. Though I might remind you that there's still no guarantee we'll leave this place alive."

"Impatient, are you?" Nadene stood on her tip toes and pressed her lips against his, quick as a nix-hound. A delightful shock sprouted from her touch and spread to all corners of his body. His legs melted. Gelebor raised a hand to his face, and swallowed. The nocturnal visitors to his Wayshrine had not been into kissing, as a rule. They had never made him feel this way.

"Now let's see about getting out of here, huh?"

Gelebor nodded dumbly.

Gamlen's head slunk into view from the open trapdoor, a distasteful shadow from which two small red eyes peered into the darkness. He vanished for a second, and then a weathered rope came down.

"Jus' the girl," Gamlen said.

"She's hurt." Gelebor stepped out, his hands behind him. "The fall broke several of her ribs. Slaves are such fragile things, really."

"Twasn't a slave. Ya couldn't fool the boss and ya can't fool me, n'wah."

"Nevertheless. I doubt your master will be happy when he hears you've damaged his prize."

"To Oblivion with Netchbreaker." Gamlen spat. "Stupid fuckin' name. He don't know about this little visit, and he ain't gonna find out. Was me that kept you from runnin' off with that bastard's pretty stone. Don't expect I'll be seein' any of that gold, so I'll get my cut in a different fashion."

"Well, it's my property you'll be damaging. Don't expect me to keep quiet."

"I don't. That's the beauty of the illusion school, innit?" Gelebor could see the mer smile even from down below. "She'll 'ave a good time, and I'll wipe both yer heads after. Everyone leaves happy. Even if ya won't remember why."

"Fine. Have her, then. I'll wait in the corner."

"No. I ain't that thick. Step mores into the light, so I can see yer bindings. Hurry, now. Boss wants ya both at the feast, so I got to have my fun quick."

Gelebor turned so the mage could see his retied binds. Gamlen snickered and lowered his hand through the trap door. For a moment, a brilliant green light filled the pit, illuminating piles of bones and Nadene lying supine. The spell washed over Gelebor and he collapsed into the ash as stiff as a corpus victim.

"Now you, girl. Or the next one'll be a fireball. I don't give a damn what Netchbreaker says."

There was no answer from the darkness.

Gamlen let out a stream of curses and grabbed the rope, slowly descending. He kept one hand free, green tendrils of magic swirling around his fingers. Gelebor watched black boots land softly in the ash next to his face.

"Come out. I know ya got that clamp on, so ain't no use in fighting."

The sharp light from the open trapdoor kept Gelebor's eyes from adjusting to the dark, and he was sure it was having a similar effect on Gamlen.

"How many tries do you have left?" Nadene called softly.

"Huh?" Gamlen turned, his hand raised.

"Paralysis is a tough spell. How many times can you cast it, before you have to rest?"

"Don't ya worry about that." Gamlen licked his lips. "Once'll be enough for a little lady like you, I think."

"Probably," Nadene replied, closer than before, and Gamlen fired his spell. The pit exploded with light, and she rushed forward as the orb of energy flew into a bone pile.

Nadene tackled Gamlen and they wrestled on the ground.

Gamlen punched, stunning her, and pushed away. He was scrambling to his feet when Nadene's bone dagger found the back of his calf. Gamlen howled and fell, blood spurting.

"Don't need magic to kill a rat," Nadene hissed, and crawled forward with her dagger. Gamlen stopped making sounds seconds later, and a few minutes after that Gelebor could move again.

"Thank you," he said, accepting Nadene's hand. She was already wearing the bandit mage's robes and rubbing her sore wrist. She'd healed the cut on her forehead, and did the same to his rib. "Are we still going with the original plan?"

"I don't see why not." She knelt down before Gamlen's still form. The mer's neck was a ruin, and his sightless eyes stared up at the trap door. Nadene put her hands over his face, and when she took them away it was her own eyes that were revealed.

"Revolting," Gelebor murmured. "I'd heard of a face sculptor down in Riften, but to see such a thing performed..." The sight of Nadene lying dead, even knowing it was a facade, sent waves of dread through his heart.

"It's powerful alteration magic." Nadene fished around in the robe, and took out a blue potion bottle. She downed the whole container and tossed it aside.

"I would have thought illusion."

"No." She turned away, covering her own face. "Illusion magic alters mortal perception of the world. Alteration alters *the world*. Many think that the path to power lies in fireballs and lightning bolts. They have no idea." Nadene glanced back at him wearing the face of the dead mer at their feet. Gamlen's eyes were small and cruel, like those of a skeever.

"Let's get this over with." Gelebor swallowed.

"What? Miss my ugly mug already?"

"Quite dearly."

Nadene's grin faded. She reached for the swaying rope.

"Dead?"

Netchbreaker spoke softly, but every bandit in the feasting room fell silent. Gelebor stood behind Nadene, his head bowed.

"Aye. Don't know if the wench did it to herself, or the boy 'ere is to blame."

"This is...disappointing, to say the least." Netchbreaker's hands squeezed the arms of his chair, but he did not rise. "The woman seemed the more exciting of the two by far. You're certain none of these s'wits were responsible?"

"Cast me best trespassing spell on the trapdoor. Was still there when I came back for 'em."

"Ah." *Smart. Remind him why he keeps Gamlen around, so he's less likely to cut both our heads off.* "Well, I suppose there's nothing for it. Leave the body. I believe Mathesu's tastes trend in that direction."

"Right you are." Nadene began to slip away. Conversations resumed around the hall.

"Oh, Gamlen?"

"Boss?"

"I want another living girl by sunset tomorrow." Netchbreaker smiled. "Or we're going to find out just how long someone can survive in the pit before they start eating their own body parts. Yes?"

Nadene nodded. *Glad we won't have to honor that particular promise.*

"Do what you need to with the other one, there. Find out why he wants the red stone. But after the feast. Screaming ruins my appetite."

"You got it," Nadene replied, but Netchbreaker had already lost interest in them. He turned to one of the few reavers seated near him, presumably one of his lieutenants, and began a low and animated conversation in Dunmeris. Gelebor and Nadene slipped away into the crowd of bandits noisily eating and laughing.

As Gelebor noted before, the vagabonds seemed to give Gamlen a wide berth. Nadene led him to a secluded corner of the hall, bathed in shadow. They sat down at a small table with their backs to Netchbreaker. A risky move, but the bandit leader had already demonstrated an aptitude for sniffing out treachery. Seeing his pet mage and newest prisoner engaged in a private talk would no doubt arouse his attention.

"I'm still not sure about this next part," Gelebor said quietly. "There seems to be a significant chance one or both of us will catch an arrow before the end."

"I've been thinking about that," Nadene replied. "Netchbreaker being so damned smart might actually work in our favor."

"How so?"

"Cause he's curious." She grinned. It was the same expression Gamlen had worn when describing how he was going to use his illusion magic. Gelebor was queasy. "Just like us. That's why I didn't let you get eaten by that werebear, when we first met. Any other bandit captain would've had us killed on the spot for trying to steal from him. But this fetcher must be awfully bored. And he's gonna die for it."

"That may be the case.. But can you say the same for every bandit in this room?" Gelebor inclined

his head towards the stinking crowd. "You think they won't fall on us in an instant?"

"I guess we gotta rely on their fear of Netchbreaker. You saw how they went all quiet so fast before."

"True. But I still don't like this."

"Hey." She let the gravelly Gamlen voice fall away. "If you want, I'll Recall both of us to Raven Rock right now. We could find some other Heart Stone, or another way to Vvardenfell."

"You know that would take days, if not weeks," Gelebor said. "Habisunilu may not have that time."

"It won't matter anyway if we die here." Nadene nudged his foot under the table. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes." He swallowed. "I'm ready."

"Don't be gentle," Nadene ordered, her eyes smiling.

"Not a chance."

Gelebor roared and flipped the table, sending plates exploding against the stones like comets of ceramic. Nadene scrambled out of the way, but he grabbed the back of her robe.

"The bastard's loose!" She yelled, and every sword in the hall was unsheathed in a cacophony of rasping metal. Gelebor grabbed the sword at Nadene's waist and tossed her away, none too softly. He didn't look where she landed.

"Stay back, all of you." Gelebor pointed his blade at the cursing band of vagabonds. "Or suffer the fury of the last Snow Elf in Tamriel!"

At that declaration, several reavers that had been edging closer dissolved back into the crowd. Many of them looked back at the raised steps and their leaders.

Netchbreaker stood, but drew no weapon.

"A Snow Elf, you say?" He squinted at Gelebor, and raised a hand to still the eager horde. "An interesting deception. Better than your previous, in any case."

"This is no lie. You stand before Knight-Paladin Gelebor. For millennia, I guarded the sacred Chantry of Auriel, hidden away in the frozen mountains of Skyrim."

"Pretty words, that mean nothing." Netchbreaker scratched his chin. "I suspect you're nothing more than an Altmer con man trying to tread water while you plan some sort of daring escape. If this is the case, you will fall easily to my lieutenant's sword. Mathesu, cut down this fraud."

One of the mer seated near him rose with a thin smile and drew his weapon. Mathesu was clad in chitin armor, but wore no helmet. *I must buy Nadene the time she needs. That's all that matters.*

"This is an uneven match," Gelebor complained. The nearest bandits spat at him. "I wear no armor, but your man is protected from neck to toe."

"Would a Knight-Paladin need armor to defeat scum like this?" Netchbreaker sat back down in his chair. "I found Mathesu drowning in a Blacklight gutter at the age of eleven. He's no Umbra, that's for sure. So shut your mouth and die quickly, or prove you're who you say."

Gelebor didn't dare glance to the corner of the room to see if Nadene had begun. *I must have faith.*

Mathesu came down the steps and passed through the agitated crowd, his eyes boring into Gelebor.

"This will be too easy," Mathesu said. "You're gonna wish you stayed on your island, goldskin. Been too long since I cut one of you n'wahs down to size."

"I'm no Altmer." Gelebor hadn't realized before how much he liked saying that. "And I'm sorry, but you are going to die."

Mathesu yelled a curse and ran forward with his sword, relying on his armor to shield his approach. Gelebor twisted away, barely escaping the blade's reach, and delivered a blow to his opponent's leg armor. The attack barely left a dent in the chitin.

Blast. This sword is as dull as daily prayer. Never before had he so yearned for a good mace.

They circled each other, swords raised. The other bandits kept their distance, but yelled mocking commentary whenever Gelebor drew near. On the raised steps Netchbreaker watched the duel intently.

"Frightened, boy?" Mathesu smirked.

"Not particularly," Gelebor replied, and lunged. He feinted left and immediately punished Mathesu's block, driving his elbow into the other mer's face and slashing at a gap in his thigh armor.

Gelebor danced away as Mathesu screamed. He held one hand to his broken nose, and barely kept the sword up with the other. Blood seeped around the chitin plate on his leg.

"Perhaps you are more than you seem, after all." Netchbreaker's deep voice carried over the laughs and jeers of his men. "Let's find out. Throw aside your sword."

"Pardon?"

"Mathesu is obviously no match for you, even with his advantage." Netchbreaker rested his chin on clasped hands. "Drop your blade, or I'll have you filled with arrows. I will not ask again."

Gelebor swallowed and tossed his weapon away. Mathesu watched him, seething, blood staining his teeth.

"Continue," Netchbreaker ordered, and Mathesu charged.

This time, Gelebor wasn't quick enough. He ducked under the blade but could not avoid the hilt. His forehead exploded with pain, and he stumbled away with black stars in his vision.

Mathesu advanced relentlessly. Gelebor managed to dodge the sword again, but then the flat of the blade was coming towards his head from behind. He was knocked to the ground. Mathesu stood over him, the sword held high. He was breathing heavily, but he looked towards Netchbreaker.

"You've fought well," Netchbreaker remarked. "You may even be a 'Knight-Paladin', as you say. But you've wounded Mathesu gravely, and I won't deny him his revenge. Your life is in-"

"By Azura!" A bandit cried from the back of the hall. "Gamlen lives!"

"Silence!" Netchbreaker roared, obviously unaccustomed to interruption. All eyes were drawn to the shouting bandit, and the emerald brilliance convalescing around him.

"It's Gamlen!" The bandit said again. "I thought he musta been killed by that throw. But he's standing here, right as rain! Well, ain't standing, exactly."

"None of you s'wits move. I want to see this." Netchbreaker stood up, urgency in his voice. "A lantern, you fool!"

The lone bandit grabbed a fallen lantern off the ground and took a few seconds to light the wick. All the while, the green light grew brighter. Nadene's arms and legs moved in harmony, and Gelebor could not help but be enchanted. The air tasted charged, like power and potential coming together.

"See? 'Tis him, isn't it?"

"Gamlen? What in Oblivion...are you dancing?"

"Nope," Nadene replied in her own voice.

Netchbreaker leapt just as Nadene drove her fist into the ground. The room exploded in waves of emerald, silverware and tables soaring in every direction. The bandits were showered in soup and bread. Every being in the room went as still as death, and Netchbreaker landed like a statue on the ground, his arms still outstretched. Gelebor was not immune. He watched helplessly in the cage of his body as Nadene collapsed. The master spell had drained her utterly.

After a minute Nadene began to move again, and reached a shaky hand into her robe for a potion bottle. She drained it and crawled towards Gelebor. It seemed like an eternity passed before Nadene grabbed his hand and he felt the Dispel effect wash over him. She put her hands over her face, and when she removed them Gamlen was gone.

"Too weak, now." Nadene rasped. Gelebor hopped to his feet. "Gonna have to carry me."

"How much time do we have?"

"Minutes."

Gelebor hesitated. His eyes went to Mathesu, and the blade in the frozen mer's hands. There might be enough time to slit the throat of every reaver in the room. They all deserved death, certainly. The pit had been full of bones, no doubt the remains of innocent travelers and traders. But for whatever reason, the thought of performing so many cold-blooded executions seemed abhorrent. *I must remember: Auriel is gone. He can judge me no longer.*

Leaving the reavers to continue their vile work seemed almost as deplorable. If Netchbreaker put Divayth's family to the sword sometime in the future, however unlikely that occurrence, the blood would be on Gelebor's hands.

"Nadene?" He wanted her counsel, but she made no response. *Damn. I think she's fallen asleep.*

Time was running short. Gelebor tapped his fingers together, agitated.

"You'll make a fine rug, cat!"

Kharjo sighed. It seemed these Solstheim bandits were no more creative than their Skyrim counterparts. He advanced, blocking every one of the incoming arrows with his shield.

"You remind me of my cousin's cat! Killed that, too!" Kharjo shook his head. This was just

embarrassing.

The bandit's last arrow went wild, and Kharjo destroyed the bow with his shield and sent the bandit to his knees. He kicked the slender Nord to the ground and put an armored boot on his chest.

"Now you are the rug, yes?" Kharjo didn't feel the need to draw his sword. "What? You do not laugh?"

"Please!" The bandit blubbered. "Mercy! Mercy!"

"Hush, hush. Khajiit has an amazing sense of smell, and excellent hearing. He will tolerate a stinky rug or a loud one, but not both."

"Mercy!"

"Kharjo is regretting his purchase. He thinks he will return this unpleasant floorcloth. But he must know something first. Two elves; one tall and white as the sands of Elsweyr, and the other small and fiery. These are his friends. Where have they gone?"

"Inside!" The Nord pointed frantically towards the largest tower, squirming around on his back like a great turtle. "Senso brought 'em in around noon. That's all I know. Please, mercy!"

"You are fortunate, rug. The great Divayth Fyr gifted me this armor of shimmering ebony, and I have no wish to cover it in your blood and tears. It is him you can thank for your life. But first, remove your clothes."

"Huh?"

Kharjo pressed his boot down until the Nord was gasping for breath.

"This Khajiit wants his rug bare. You may leave this citadel with your pride or your soul. Make your choice swiftly."

The Nord began wriggling out of his clothes, and Kharjo stepped away so he could complete the process. In a minute the bandit was naked and shivering.

"Ha. This amuses Kharjo. You know the path to Raven Rock?"

He nodded miserably.

"Your face may be known there. Admit your crimes to the Redoran or not, it makes no difference to me. You have nothing. You are nothing. Know that it was Kharjo that made you this way. And should you return to your lawless ways, know that it will be he who hunts you down."

"Thank you. Thank you! Praise Talos!"

"Do not praise Talos. Praise Khajiit! And one last thing."

The bandit's bottom lip trembled. "Yes?"

"Go find your cousin a new cat. And do not kill it this time, you bloodthirsty snowman."

Kharjo watched the pale figure stumble down the tower steps and vanish around the curve of the shore. No doubt the man would die on his way to Raven Rock, with all the dangers on the long path west. But there was no time to waste thinking of such a worthless floor covering.

Four more sentries were dotted around the exterior, and none were eager to surrender as the Nord had. Kharjo dispatched them with ease, and found a bridge leading to the central tower. He pulled on his ebony helm, cursing how it obscured his peripheral vision. *Better a bonked head than a severed one.* No doubt the bandits inside would have heard the commotion. He kicked open the doors and rushed in.

He stood alone in the entry chamber, his adrenaline going to waste. Kharjo was not foolish enough to lower his sword. He focused his ears, but could not hear even the sounds of normal habitation. Footsteps, doors opening and closing, muffled voices. There was simply nothing. The air smelled of copper and ozone. *Blood and magic, yes? Perhaps the Nerevarine and her Knight-Paladin have taken care of the entire tower. Most impressive.*

The feasting hall was an utter mess. Tables, plates, and food were scattered everywhere, and there was a pool of blood on the floor. *Not enough to be from a corpse. Interesting.* He knelt, studying the blood. There were red drops leading out of the room. Kharjo followed them.

An absolute darkness filled the corridor, but Kharjo could see with perfect clarity. He followed the blood trail into the bowels of the tower, pausing every now and then and listening. A foul smell was growing nearer.

Finally, Kharjo heard movement ahead. Someone was pushing a sizable object with all their strength, groaning with the effort. *Marvelous. Khajiit can catch them unawares.* He crouched down, sneaking as best he could in the ebony armor. There was light down the next hallway.

Kharjo was stepping over a dead body when it reached out and grabbed his hand. He yelped and scurried away, nearly dropping his sword in the process.

"Kharjo?" Nadene asked, rubbing her eyes. "It's me. Put the blighted sword down."

"Ahh. Forgive me, Nadene. Khajiit has a great fear of the undead. You startled him."

She sat up, her back to the wall. "I can see that. Pretty armor, by the way. Have you come to rescue us?"

"This was Kharjo's intention. Though it appears you require no saving."

"Was a close thing." She yawned. "And I'm bloody exhausted. Gelebor, too. You should go help him out."

"A fine idea." Kharjo continued down the hallway, towards the loud noises. There were empty bottles on the ground that smelled of netch jelly and salmon roe. "Knight-Paladin! Your friend Kharjo is coming to assist you. Do not stab him!"

"Okay," came the weary reply.

He found Gelebor bracing himself on a large dresser, panting. His skin was drenched in sweat. There was a trap door in the floor in front of them. Kharjo wrinkled his nose. It was from there that the awful odor came.

"This is where you put the dead?" Kharjo asked.

"No." Gelebor took several deep breaths before speaking again. "Not dead. Paralyzed. Maybe broken limbs, on some of them. Little bit...of a fall."

Kharjo glanced at the dresser again, and comprehended. "Ah. Khajiit understands. You are certain

they will not escape?"

"We killed their only mage." Gelebor patted the dresser. "With this over the trapdoor, even a team of trolls would have difficulty."

"From the smell, I would not be surprised to see such creatures down below."

He helped Gelebor push the dresser into place, and let the Knight-Paladin lean on him as they returned to Nadene.

She let Kharjo help her stand. And then she went to Gelebor and hugged him tightly. Kharjo watched, blinking. *Perhaps his elf friends are closer than Kharjo thought.* That would be a pleasant development. His own mind went to Zaynabi, her fur soft and warm, but he pushed aside his grief with little effort. *We will see each other again, soon enough.*

"Let's grab the Heart Stone and get back to Tel Mithryn," Nadene grumbled. "I could use a bath and some ash yam soup right about now."

"Kharjo heartily agrees." He slid his arms around their shoulders, happy to help his friends along. "He is eager to leave these stinky bandits behind."

The Great Darkness

"And Fadomai gave birth to Lorkhaj, the last of her litter, in the Great Darkness. And the Heart of Lorkhaj was filled with the Great Darkness. And when he was born, the Great Darkness knew its name and it was Namiira." - Words of Clan Mother Ahnissi

Where the Sixth House once held dominion, under countless layers of ash and rock, past steaming vents and rivers of magma, Eola stood before her kneeling congregation and sung Namira's praises until the skin of her lips cracked and bled and redness dripped from her chin and sizzled on the warm stones below.

"When we made landing on Vvardenfell, we were four. Now dozens of the faithful have hearkened to Namira's call, and with every new arrival her influence grows. But our strength has never been in numbers. The heathen city of Balmora fell to our goddess with nary a sword drawn on our part. The survivors, those who did not fall in the fighting or join Namira's ranks, will serve to sustain the rest of us until the day of prophecy arrives."

At that, there was a murmuring of excitement. Gray faces and glowing red eyes looked up at her through the gloom with reverence and hunger in equal measure. These Dunmer were a hardy people, and scarcely needed the potions and protection that kept Eola herself and the other humans from succumbing to these hostile environs. *They will serve our Lady well.*

"Yes. I know you've been eager to hear more of the promised meal of legend. Perhaps Namira has even shown fit to grant some of you a hint of the delights to come, in the dreams she used to call the faithful to action. Know this: soon enough, a lost child will take his first step on to the blasted ash plains of Vvardenfell. A child of Akatosh."

At the mention of the Chief Divine, several of the cultists sneered and spat, and hissed curses in a language Eola did not know.

"I know." She smiled. "We must always hate the Aedra, for they are the ultimate purveyors of falsehood in this plane and all others. They whisper in the ears of the weak, convincing them that life will reward them for spreading empty platitudes and following ideals devoid of reality or truth. Obey the law. Do your duty for your nation. Treat others with kindness and mercy. Bury your dead. Love your friends and family. No longer. For millennia we have waited. Now our time has come. The Divines these sheep have so dearly worshiped for thousands of years have abandoned them at last, and Tiber Septim's Empire is dying. We will fall on the corpse like vultures, and build a new order of flesh and fire!"

Eola's brothers and sisters rose to their feet, cheering and shouting, as her words took hold of them and Namira's vision danced through their heads. Lisbet came up behind her, grinning wickedly.

"This child of Akatosh is the last true Falmer. Not those goblin-like monsters that roam Skyrim's underground, that you may have heard of through rumor and legend. No: this elf has virgin skin of white, untouched by time or battle. Namira is bringing the last Snow Elf to us, so he may lie on our feasting table and know absolutely that his god has no more strength in this world. When we eat Akatosh's last lost child, his failure will be complete. Namira's power will rise to heights never before seen. The mourning bells will ring their last in Cyrodiil and High Rock, and the Imperials will know their doom has come. Just as many of you were awakened by visions from Namira, so will thousands and thousands rise in the Heartlands and Daggerfall. Loving parents will devour children in their beds, and husbands will consume their wives. We shall gorge ourselves on the battered Legions from within and without, should they dare to rise!"

The cultists screamed and shook, gripped by their faith. Their calls echoed off the cavern walls, transforming into unholy wails that no doubt reached the distant prisoners in their cells. Eola could only imagine the dread those cattle must be feeling right now. *I'll have to pay them a visit, later.*

"And the Empire is just the beginning. When the streets of the Imperial City run with blood, we will turn our attention to Black Marsh, Elsweyr, and Skyrim. We will return to Markarth in triumph and consume the city that gave birth to our coven. No fighting force can stand against us, for we have followers in every army in Tamriel. Even the Summerset Isles will feel Namira's truth before the end. When the Lady of Decay holds Nirn in her grip, the barriers between Mundus and Oblivion will shatter, and we will know the glory of apocalypse and feast for centuries untold! Listen closely, my brothers and sisters! *We are going to kill the world!*"

The screaming reached a crescendo, her followers barely able to remain on their feet, and Eola's laughter was lost in the waves of sound. She grabbed Lisbet and kissed her hungrily. Eola could feel the other woman licking the blood from her lips, and a shiver ran through her. *When we stand before the Ruby Throne, we'll tear the High Chancellor apart and eat him together. Then I'll ask her to marry me.*

They turned from the writhing masses, barely able to keep their hands off each other.

"You were beautiful," Lisbet said, breathless. "I wanted to rip into you right there."

"A priestess must have some secrets from her followers," Eola replied, tugging on her hand to get her to go faster down the craggy passageway. "This isn't a coven of Sanguine, my sweet. But no more talking. I have other designs for that mouth of yours."

They passed by the opening to the prisoner cavern, and a thin shape peeled off of the shadows to meet them. He'd shed his chitin armor, and wore his old clothes that stunk sharply of hounds and sweat.

"Banning," Eola said. "I have no time for you right now."

"I could hear you all the way from here," Banning replied. "The entire world, Eola? Really?"

"Of course. Namira's hunger knows no bounds." Eola pushed him aside. "If you wish to stand beside us when those blessed days come, you'll return to your prisoners. You have a job to do."

"Going off to have a little fun, huh?" His greasy little eyes flickered to Lisbet, and then back to her.

Eola didn't deign to reply.

"Maybe I'll just join ya. We're all family, ain't we? I've been feeling a little left out, like I've been banished to live near the cattle. Don't forget who pulled off Balmora. I had to live among the grayskins for months, pretendin' to be one of them."

"We worked together to destroy the city." Eola glared. "Watching over our livestock is a sacred privilege. I know I can trust you not to indulge in any personal consumption, for you have the interests of the coven at heart. That's why I delivered you from the hopelessness of the Markarth stables. Remember your loyalties, kennelmaster. You will *not* be joining us."

"Don't worry," Banning said cheerfully. "I know where my meals come from, honey. There is one thing you oughta know, though."

"What?"

"The little grayskin. One that tried to spear me back in Balmora. She ain't been eating."

"Hmm. For how long?"

"Since the start." He yawned. "None of 'em ate on the first night, 'course, but they all came around eventually. I reckon days of starvation makes your dead friends look mighty tasty. Don't know if she'll last another week."

"I'll see her later." Eola grabbed Lisbet's hand. "For now, give her cellmate extra. Dig into my spice collection. Make it steaming and fragrant."

"Alrighty. Wish Hogni was around. That bastard could even make Khajiit taste good."

"I'm sure you'll manage. We still have plenty of dead from Balmora." She felt Banning's eyes follow them as they left his domain. Until more of the Dunmer were proven, Eola knew she had to put up with the slimy wretch. He was scarcely more intelligent than Hogni Red-Arm, but Banning possessed a low cunning that worried her.

He'd known Eola before Namira, when she'd been a novice mage in Markarth's court. When she'd had two eyes and been blind to Namira's truth. There was danger in raising weak men high. Banning's competence would inevitably fail long before he could fulfill his lofty aspirations, like a broken glass trying to hold a fine wine. Eola'd have to put him back where he belonged before that day came, or else be forced to clean up the mess. There would be a time for chaos, but Namira required order for her plans to come to fruition. Eola knew she might not survive the journey, but did not fear. She was no Mankar Camoran. After killing the child of Akatosh, she would slip back into the filth and the shadows where she belonged.

"Distracted?" Lisbet teased.

"Yes." Eola bit the inside of her cheek, relishing the sharp pain that drew her out of her troubled thoughts. "Sometimes I feel you're the only competent sibling left of our original coven. Hogni should have sent word from the Telvanni coast by now. I do hope he's not trying to have ideas all on his own."

"That's frightening." Lisbet walked ahead, pulling Eola along. "I've spoken to some of the Dark Elves. They mostly keep to themselves, speaking that language of theirs with all the funny punctuation. But they tell me they love you, and they love Namira."

"Of course they'd say that. It's no secret you have my ear." Eola smiled. "Among other things."

"No. These things I heard when you had me listening in, on the first nights. Unless they can see through invisibility potions, none of the elves woulda known I was there. Their devotion is true, Eola. I think we can rely on them."

"Perhaps." They entered Eola's chamber, an opening larger than most of the others cut into the far side of the cavern. "I do miss Sanyon and Nimphaneth. It was a mistake to send two of our three mages to Solstheim. Now Nim is with our mistress in the Scuttling Void, and we can't contact Sanyon since Balmora has fallen."

Lisbet wrapped her arms around Eola's waist. They stood in front of her mirror, visible by the grace of a Dwemer lantern swaying softly above. She stared into her own empty socket, hungry for guidance from Namira.

"You worry too much, my sweet," Lisbet said, resting her chin on Eola's shoulder. "Sanyon's the smartest elf I've ever met. He's the one who found out about the Nerevar lady."

"Nerevarine," Eola corrected. "The promised one follows this woman, and the woman will come for her kin. That's why we need to keep the little morsel alive. In regards to this Dark Elf, we *must* tread carefully. A reincarnated Dark Elf warlord was never a part of my visions. She might have a spell tracking the girl's heartbeat, for all I know. And would this Nadene Othryn come to Vvardenfell for a dead little elf?" She grimaced. "I don't like question marks in my plans."

"Listen." Lisbet whispered in her ear, sending goosebumps across Eola's neck. "You're the Champion of Namira. The Ring-Bearer, the leader of a coven that was born at the start of time and will remain until time has run out. You led us from Reachcliff Cave into the light of day, all the way to this ruined island. When Hogni returns with good news, you'll have conquered Vvardenfell from the shadows, in true service to the Lady of Decay. The others may have had their doubts. But I always believed, Eola."

Lisbet bit down on her ear, and Eola hissed and leaned into her. A thought from earlier suddenly came back to her, and she couldn't resist asking.

"When we stand in the Imperial Palace," Eola breathed. "When we drink of the blood and bile of the Elder Council. Will you lay down in the filth and gore and marry me?"

"Oh, yes! Of course I will! I'd do it right now if you asked."

Eola sat on the end of the bed and pulled Lisbet between her legs. They kissed so roughly the wounds on her lips tore anew.

"Patience, dear. Namira has waited millennia for her day of reckoning. We must follow her example."

Lisbet grinned, blood smeared across her chin, and Eola could resist no longer. She yanked Lisbet on top of her and they rolled and fought on the bed. The sheets were stained with drops of red, but the sight only inflamed Eola's passion. She had the presence of mind to cast a muffle spell on the room before surrendering to Lisbet's embrace.

"You are being foolish," Akh'idzo said. "Foolish and stubborn."

There was no answer from the dark corner of the cell.

"Look, girl." He took another bite. "We're going to need our strength to survive this ordeal. There's no shame in that. You really think anyone will think less of you?"

Still no reply. A plate of meat sat untouched near the bars, next to an empty cup. *The water keeps me alive. For how long? Don't know. Days more? Weeks? Never been so hungry.*

"I'm eating. Look, see? Just one bite after another." Akh'idzo set down his fork. "The Divines are not going to just abandon me. My wife Marasa in the cell across from us, she eats it too, and she's a Dark Elf. Maybe you should come out and talk to her."

The faint hold she had on her consciousness made it easier to ignore the Khajiit, at least. She wondered distantly if she even had the strength left to crawl to the bars. Just going to drink the water had been a monumental effort.

"What are you trying to prove, hm? I learned a little of you, in my months in Balmora. You are an Ashlander. Do you believe your ancestors will reward you for starving to death? Do you not think they would have made an appearance when you still had the ability to stand?"

"You know." She didn't know she had the energy to form the words until they passed from her lips.

"What?"

"You know...what you eat." Habisunilu pulled herself out of the darkness, glaring. "Dunmer."

"Yes," Akh'idzo replied. "I don't enjoy this. And no one is asking you to. But would you rather die with your pride, girl?"

"Your wife," Habi sneered. "A monster. The dead... are sacred." She didn't dare glance at the plate of food, afraid of what she might do. The smell of the meat filled the cell and set her mouth watering.

"Marasa is making a sacrifice so when the day comes, we will be strong enough to escape this horrible place. Where will you be? Either in the stomach of one of these monsters, or so light that I'll be able to carry you in one arm. If you were capable of doing so, I'd suggest you pray for the latter." Akh'idzo turned away from her.

Maybe I'll be in your stomach, n'wah. Habi was glad they were done talking, because she'd not the energy to respond. Every movement sent waves of dizziness through her, and it was difficult to form coherent thoughts. Her limbs felt like the ship's anchors she'd once watched plunge deep into the Odai off the banks of Balmora. On the first night under Red Mountain she'd stared into the wall, spoke little, and easily ignored the offered meat. Someone had healed her wounds from the trials. That Eola woman, most likely. *I'm going to kill her slow.*

On the second night she'd wept for Erandur. He'd died alone, without his god, in that awful tent on the field of blood. That is, if the cultists hadn't collected his body for their meals. Habi found it easier to resist the meat if she imagined every sizzling plate they brought her had come from poor Erandur. Every evening, her grief and honor fought a battle with her ever growing hunger.

Habi was hoping that by the time she could fight no longer, she'd be too debilitated to carry out the betrayal of the traditions that had guided her entire life's path. *The dead are sacred. Marasa Darvel and the other Dunmer, they are the weak ones. They'll pay for what they've done.* It was some small mercy that Habi shared a cell with the only outlander in Balmora. If she'd been forced to watch another Dunmer eat of the honored dead for days on end, she wasn't sure if she could have held out. That was part of the reason she didn't dare speak to Marasa, as Akh'idzo suggested.

Sometimes Habi wondered if Nadene would eat, if she were here. The Nerevarine had no doubt faced trials greater than this on her journey to defeat Dagoth Ur, but Nadene had never been a Dunmer of great faith. Maybe she'd think of consuming the dead as simple pragmatism, as Marasa and Akh'idzo did. Maybe in a week or a month, Nadene would break open this cell to find her granddaughter a desiccated husk of skin and bones and curse her for being so prideful and stubborn. It was when Habi thought of this moment that she felt the greatest temptation, and the presence of the full plate in the cell burned in her mind and drowned out all other thoughts. *No. No. The dead are sacred. Not food. People. Dunmer.* She imagined Erandur's head on the dish, her father's head, her mother's.

Habi reached her leg out and kicked the plate through the bars, her eyes squeezed shut. She didn't stop and look until she felt the smooth ground under her feet and every scrap of food was out of reach. Akh'idzo glanced over, sighed, then turned away again. The act of rebellion had sapped what little strength she had. At least in Habi's nightmares the pangs of hunger receded. She went gratefully to the darkness in her head.

Habi's stomach woke her up in the small hours of the morning. Or, at least, when everyone else

was asleep. Whenever the guard passed by with his torch, she could see Marasa slumbering in the cell across the passageway with another Dunmer woman. Ever since the third day, they had left clean plates for the guard to collect. *Unforgivable. They're traitors.* Seizing on to her contempt and righteousness distracted Habi from her hunger.

She sat against the wall, close to the bars. Someone had already cleaned up the mess she'd made outside. There were footsteps. A cultist was coming.

Banning ambled into view, already wearing a mocking grin. Habi hadn't seen him since the night of the trials. In his hand he held an ash yam, and at the sight of it her stomach roared.

"Heard you still ain't eating, honey." Banning leaned against the bars. He tossed the vegetable between his hands. "You're fuckin' lucky. You know how many years I had to eat cows and pigs, holding out for those special feasts in ol' Reachcliff Cave? And now you're getting good meals without a scrap of effort, and you think *you're* too good for 'em?"

She glared. It was all she could do. One of Habi's greatest regrets was that she hadn't shoved her spear in Banning's throat when she had the chance.

"Okay, bitch." Banning bit into the yam, chewing noisily. Akh'idzo remained asleep on his cloth mat, or at least pretended to. "Damn, that's not bad for grayskin food."

She looked away, unable to watch any longer. And her eyes widened. Sitting in the corridor, past Banning's legs, was a small cat the color of slightly burnt toast. *How in Azura did that get in here?*

"Ah, you're no fun." Banning wandered off, finishing off the rest of his yam. He failed to notice the feline in the shadows, but Habi was transfixed. *I must be hallucinating.* That would explain the toast color, at least. *I wonder if I'm hungry enough to eat a cat.*

Oblivious to Habi's murderous ponderings, the cat glanced both ways down the dark corridor before scurrying towards the cell. The animal's bright eyes reminded Habi of the moons high in the sky on a clear Frostfall night. It was holding something in its mouth.

C'mere, cat. I won't hurt you. Habi watched the creature creep closer. *No promises about tomorrow, though. I'll eat you before I eat a Dunmer.*

NO EAT RENJI!

Habi gasped, the rogue thought exploding across her consciousness like a fireball. The little cat ran past her cell and out of sight.

Oh, wonderful. I'm losing my blighted mind. And now I've scared away my only possible source of food. Before too long I'll probably be chewing off my fingers. Habisunilu, abandoned by her ancestors. That's what they should call me. She didn't have the energy reserves to waste on crying, so she resolved to simply settle into the numbness taking over her mind.

"I don't want to be a guard anymore," Habi said to no one. "I want to go home."

Minutes passed in a hazy stupor. It was difficult enough to keep track of time so far underground. Slowly starving to death didn't improve her concentration. Habi wasn't sure how long it was until the cat peeked its head around the corner and began watching her through the bars.

You're probably safe. Don't think I have the strength to catch you, anyway.

Elf hungry?

Another thought out of nowhere. Was this her stomach becoming sentient, turning against her at last? If so, Habi wished it would stop beating around the bush and get on to the betrayal. Certainly Banning would love to see her surrender at last.

Yeah, I'm hungry. Think you would have caught on to that by now.

No stomach. Renji.

The brown cat slipped between the bars and padded towards her cautiously. It was still holding something in its mouth.

Call yourself whatever you want. I'm about ready to turn over control, to be honest. My way seems to be killing us.

The cat paused, cocking its head. It set down whatever it was carrying and laid down in front of it, watching her.

Elf stupid.

"Great," Habi rasped. "Own gut insulting me, now. Ancestors laughing."

"Hi," the cat spoke aloud. Its voice was flutey, like wind through a field of saltrice. "Hungry?"

Habi swallowed and nodded. *I give up. Sheogorath, take me.*

"No skooma cat. Renji. You eat."

The cat picked up its item again and came to Habi, seemingly less afraid than before. It dropped the rat into her lap. Habi glanced down at the dead rodent for a second, stricken with disbelief. *This is a dream. A cruel, impossible dream.* But she had nothing left to lose. Her arms were like heavy mushroom stalks at her sides, but at the sight of food a second wind took hold of her. Habi grabbed the rat and held it up with trembling hands.

She took a careful bite, blood running down her chin. The fur felt strange in her mouth, and little bones crunched between her teeth, but there was no taste of rot. This rat had not been dead long. And the meat, oh Azura. The meat was so wet and delicious. Soon enough the first bites hit her stomach, and Habi was lost. She tore into the rat like a Daedroth. More blood stained her chin and face, and some ran down her neck, warm and sticky. The cat sat in the shadows and watched.

The meal was over too soon. Habi's hunger had returned in full force now that she'd had something to eat at last. She felt her sore muscles tingling, and she had a headache coming on. *Need more. More of that delicious fucking rat.*

"Later," the cat said softly. "Renji must feed sister kitten. Too little to hunt."

"I've gone insane. You're talking. You're a little cat, and you're reading my mind and speaking words. In b'veking *Cyrodilic*."

"No cat." Renji straightened his posture. "Khajiit."

"That's a Khajiit." Habi pointed to Akh'idzo, and immediately regretted such a sudden movement. A wave of dizziness struck her and she took a moment to recover. "Stands on two legs. Comes from Elsweyr. Worships the moons, or at least most of them do. And he sure doesn't talk in my head. You're someone's very lost pet."

"No pet! Born in cold, but same moons! *Renji is Khajiit!*"

His voice carried out into the corridor, and Habi hushed him. She heard footsteps approaching, too quickly to be a patrol. She wiped the blood from her chin and quickly pushed Renji under her bedroll.

"Who in Oblivion were you talking to?" The guard asked in Dunmeris, glaring suspiciously at the sleeping Akh'idzo.

"Myself," Habi murmured faintly, staring off into the distance. She let her mouth fall open.

"Stubborn fetcher." He shook his head. "You'll turn eventually, girl. Everyone does. Just give in to your urges and accept Namira's embrace."

I'm going to spear every one of you s'wits. Habi ignored him until he left, and then felt Renji prodding at her mind.

Hi. What's s'wit, Habs?

Habi took a breath, trying to adapt to the sensation of another presence in her consciousness. Worst case scenario, she *was* going crazy, and attaching some sort of personality to a cat that had somehow found its way into the caverns under Red Mountain where a cult of Namira had set up their headquarters. But that rat had been no illusion. The energy it had given her was real, and Habi could feel her ruined body slowly returning to life. Best case, she had a new ally against the cultists.

Hello. A s'wit is a bad person. A disturbing thought occurred to her. How old are you, Renji?

Five. Habs have any clothes? Two glowing eyes peered out from under her bedroll.

No, except those I'm wearing. There's no way you're cold. We're underneath a volcano.

Not cold. Shamed. Lost clothes on boat.

I'm sorry. Habi pondered. You can stay here, if you want. There's a little nook in the rock in the back of the cell, too small for me. I'm sure Akh'idzo won't mind.

Okay. Renji crawled out and padded towards the bars. **Gotta get Jo.**

"Is that your sister?" Habi whispered.

Yes. Jo'ahni. Too small for mindtalk. Back soon!

Wait!

Renji looked back at her, his tail swishing through the air.

Habi held a finger to her lips. *Speak to no one. Mindtalk or mouth. There are many s'wits around. And be careful.*

Okay. Renji disappeared into the dark, and Habi soon wondered if he'd ever been there at all. Perhaps a rat had simply wandered into her cell and she'd conjured up a fantasy to convince herself to attack it. *Ha. As if I'd need convincing. And the rat would have had to hop into my lap, or I'd never have caught it.*

But a part of Habi clung to the idea that Renji was real, whatever nonsense he might have spouted about being a Khajjiit. Maybe one of the cultists had enchanted a cat for their amusement. Banning seemed to have a distaste for consuming animals, so perhaps they used them for a different purpose. *Who cares? I got to eat. And I might get to eat again. That's all that matters.*

Habi licked her lips, feeling truly alive for the first time since the night of the trials. She stared into the darkness and waited for the strange little cat and his sister to return.

Depressions

"And when the Snow Prince fell to ground,

The Ice Elves divided above and below.

Now vanquished and brutally bound,

One moment had shattered all they did know." - The Betrayed

"Vyrthur! He's here!"

The Falmer boy didn't look up from his prayer. Set against the marble floor and columns, he was nearly cloaked by the room's long shadows. Gelebor paused in the doorway, his mouth open. *Oops.*

"Sorry." He forced his voice into a more serious tone, stowing his excitement. "I didn't realize you were still in the mist of your daily worship." The ritual was important, Gelebor knew, especially since his brother was on the path to priesthood.

"Midst," Vyrthur murmured.

"Huh?"

"The word is 'midst', not mist."

"Oh. Thanks."

Silence fell between them for a time. Gelebor was used to the quiet, by now; priests and paladins of Auriel were not known for their love of long conversation, as a rule. The rays of the setting sun fell below the window. Soon enough, Vyrthur was hidden in darkness. Gelebor waited for his brother. The thrill in his heart would not still.

"Are you sure?" Vyrthur finally asked.

"Yes!" Gelebor grinned. "Knight-Paladin Siprith let me watch through his looking glass. They're coming down into the valley with a hundred horses at least!"

"A hundred?" Vyrthur rose to his feet and wiped the dust off his knees. "What're we waiting for, then? He's probably in the Chapel by now!"

He rushed past Gelebor, grabbing his hand, and they ran down long passageways of alabaster with windows of radiant gold, kept well lit by the lanterns of the Knight-Paladin's standing vigil. It was their sacred duty to keep the Chantry illuminated in the hours that Auriel slept. Sometimes Gelebor sat and watched them for hours, dreaming of the day he would complete the trials and become a warrior of light himself. He was already studying the path of the wayshrines in preparation for the first test.

Vyrthur's own training had kept him in close quarters with Arch-Curate Celekir, so he knew well the path to Auriel's Chapel. As they progressed through the Inner Sanctum, the walls seem to get wider and the ceiling higher. Gelebor fell behind, his limbs still sore from shoveling snow off the sacred paths. His brother disappeared among the throngs of the faithful streaming towards the commotion. Even though he had no memory of any place outside the Chantry, Gelebor still knew that the world beyond the valley was a violent and chaotic land covered in filthy barbarians and

worshippers of wicked power. The special arrival to the normally peaceful Chantry belonged to this world, and Gelebor imagined a glimpse of such a figure might afford him a hint of the excitement and terrors the priests were always warning them about.

"Vyrthur! Wait for me!"

Gelebor made his way politely through the crowd, and found his brother sitting on the lip of a column just inside the Chapel's grand doorway.

"You sure we're allowed up there?" Gelebor glanced at the many white robed elves still entering the Chapel. Their footsteps nearly drowned out his voice.

"I've read all the books in the library." Vyrthur crossed his legs. "Turns out, Auriel doesn't care much where you put your bottom. And old Harz is too busy right now to pay attention."

It seemed to be true. Normally, Prelate Harzius was on them like a sabre cat whenever they dared step out of line, but there was no sign of him in the ruckus. Gelebor took a deep breath and climbed up next to his brother.

"Wow."

The Chantry's visitor had brought some horses in with his entourage, and Gelebor could see them standing in a circle near the center of the grand chamber. They were graceful beasts as stark white as the Chapel itself, and far more impressive than the mules and packhorses Gelebor knew from the stables.

The faithful kept a respectful distance from the beasts, talking quietly among themselves. Several warriors dressed in heavy armor stood near the horses and conferred with the more senior prelates and paladins.

"You think anything bad happened?"

"No," Vyrthur responded. "The Snow Prince is under Auriel's protection. No harm can come to him."

"What about Cenre, last Frostfall? He loved Auriel as much as anyone in the Chantry. Didn't stop that avalanche, though."

"Then he wasn't faithful enough." Vyrthur looked away. "Maybe. I don't know."

"I thought you read all the books in the library."

"Reading and understanding are two different things. Probably not even the Arch-Curate could explain every text we have."

Gelebor wasn't sure why he was annoyed with Vyrthur's response. He'd felt a divide growing between them as they'd gone farther down separate paths of faith. And Vyrthur's training seemed to provide very few answers to the questions Gelebor had wondered about his entire life. But he agreed with his brother that the Snow Prince had not come to the Chantry with ill tidings. The energy in the room was one of surprise and excitement.

"Maybe he's come to ascend," Gelebor thought aloud.

"I don't think so. We would've heard by now if the war was over."

"I guess." It was hard, sometimes, to reckon the tides of a conflict that so seldom affected the secluded valley. Occasionally they would receive a band of injured or lost Falmer and the priests would attend to them, but the pilgrims that came to the Wayshrines usually left their worldly troubles behind.

"I can't see him," Gelebor complained.

Vyrthur stood, balancing precariously on the lip of the column, and squinted over the masses towards the horses and warriors.

"Anything?"

"No. We gotta get closer."

The two boys slipped down from the perch and made their way through the crowd. Many of the priests didn't much care for children, so it was easy enough to escape attention. By the time Vyrthur and Gelebor reached the front, the horses had knelt down and Arch-Curate Celekir stood with the Snow Prince in full view.

Gelebor gasped. *He's beautiful.* This mer was composed of fragile angles and flawless skin; there was a strange vulnerability in his countenance, a softness Gelebor would attribute more readily to the kinder Chantry priests than the fiercest warrior of the Falmer.

The Snow Prince's breastplate was near as breathtaking. Etchings of crimson gleamed in the torchlight atop layers of lacquered pale steel, like streams of blood in the snow. The armor appeared to be fresh from the smith but Gelebor knew it had seen battles long before his birth. Long white hair fell down the Prince's shoulders and slipped into the openings in the armor's gorget.

"The Great Chantry of Auriel bids welcome to our Snow Prince," Celekir's voice rumbled. "The truest champion of light in our sovereign's forces!"

The faithful bowed their heads. Gelebor suspected he and Vyrthur were short enough to avoid attention, but he obeyed nonetheless.

When Gelebor raised his chin, the Snow Prince was looking directly at him. Gelebor found it difficult to hold the Prince's gaze, but didn't dare look away. There was a strange melancholy in the mer's face. *What could make someone so pretty and powerful sad? Especially here, where Auriel's love is strongest?*

The Prince did not speak, and the silence seemed to last for ages. Gelebor could feel Vyrthur's cool hand clasping his, and hear the rustle of shifting cloth from the many figures around them. Suddenly Gelebor shivered. The Chantry had never before felt so cold. His eyes fell to the Snow Prince's armor, and then past him to the colossal windows of the Inner Sanctum and the suffocating darkness of the night.

Four thousand years later, Gelebor looked upon the armor once again, on an island far from the Forgotten Vale and the light of Auriel. He stood in front of a long mirror, unable to tear his eyes away from the reflection. Memory and reality clashed in his mind like the twin dragons that had once lived under the ice lake near the Vale's sacred Word Wall. Gelebor stared at his own face and saw a dead mer looking back at him. Glover Mallory's masterful fitting of the breastplate did not help matters. The Snow Prince's armor was like a second skin, a comfortable weight on his chest and shoulders. *I am not him. I could never be him.* He looked into his own eyes, and recalled the

coolness of a brother's hand. A wave of nausea washed over Gelebor, and he stumbled away.

"Be careful, my friend." Kharjo steadied him. It was a testament to Gelebor's distraction that he hadn't even noticed the Khajiit's approach. "There will be enough time for falling over after this little party, yes?"

"I'm not planning to drink much." Gelebor let Kharjo lead him to the couch. "Especially since we'll be returning to Divayth at midnight. Arriving to Vvardenfell intoxicated doesn't seem like the brightest idea. Thank you."

"It is no problem." Kharjo sat down next to him, and pulled at the tight collar of his shirt. "Kharjo is not so much looking forward to this event, himself. He is more suited to the long road and open sky."

"You don't have to come. I'm sure Nadene wouldn't take offense if you were to remain here until the hour of action."

"No, no. You said earlier that we are a team. We will face this dinner just as we will face Namira: our hands clasped tightly, standing against the winds."

The front door opened and Nadene entered, heavy sacks hanging off her arms. There was a tightness to how she held herself entirely unrelated to the present burden, though. Gelebor had first noticed it soon after they'd teleported from Tel Mithryn.

"Supplies for Vvardenfell," she said. "Can you grab the backpacks from my room, Kharjo?"

"It is Khajiit's pleasure."

When he had gone, Gelebor stood and accepted a couple of the sacks from Nadene. She met his eyes for a moment.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah." She looked away. "I'm fine."

She avoided his eyes and went to the kitchen, disappearing around the curve of the hallway. Gelebor followed. Nadene put her bags down on the ground and braced herself on the countertop, staring into space. He could hear her breath quicken.

"Remember our promise, Nadene." He came up behind her, and leaned his hip against the counter. "No secrets. No guilt. You want to know what I was doing, just before you arrived?"

"I..." Nadene blinked and rubbed her eyes. "What?"

"I was looking at myself in the mirror, and remembering meeting the Snow Prince when I was just a boy. The entire Chantry came to see him. Even the guardians of the most distant wayshrines."

"Oh. He must have been quite the mer."

"He was the best of us." Gelebor smiled. "Even my brother, who cared little for warriors and feats of battle, fell in love at first sight. He wouldn't stop talking about the Prince for months after that day. I was thinking that I don't deserve to wear the armor of a being who led the Snow Elves to such grand heights. I'm little more than the caretaker of a forgotten graveyard, and not even that any longer."

"You know that isn't true." Nadene nudged his shoulder, and they began to walk away. "You're the only n'wah in the world with a right to wear it. Auriel gave you *nothing* for your years of devotion. I took this chestplate from bandits who weren't interested in anything more than bags of gold. And then *I* gave it to you. Because you're a survivor, just like me."

"For all the good it's done us."

"No. Don't think like that. You said to Kharjo once that it's not enough, to just survive. You decided to be the kindest fetcher on Solstheim, as well. Certainly kinder than I'll ever be. So accept my gift and wear it proudly. I'm the only one who can tell you to take that armor off."

He laughed, and followed Nadene to the couch. He dropped his own supplies on the ground and let her sit before speaking again.

"You're right. I was being foolish." Gelebor put his arm around her shoulder and she leaned against him after a moment's hesitation. The warmth of Nadene's body felt like nothing he'd ever encountered, like something he'd been waiting for his entire life. "Now. Please, tell me what's bothering you."

"Okay...I was out buying food, and thinking about what I was going to wear to this dinner. And an image flashed through my mind." Nadene sighed. "Of Habi, wrapped in chains in some dark cavern. Tired, hungry, alone. If she's not already dead. And I'm standing in this miserable city thinking about thrice-damned dresses."

"Lord Fyr is sending us to Vvardenfell, tonight. You're doing everything you can for her." He caught her eye, but Nadene wasn't seeing him. "Did you manage to speak to Second Councilor Arano while you were out?"

"Yes."

"And what does he think?"

"Take a guess. He claims Raven Rock has no soldiers to spare, and by the time he and Councilor Morvayn could convince another Redoran lord to send their forces to the most infamously doomed island on Nirn..."

"It would be too late." Gelebor took her hands. "Very well. Listen to me, now. You've exhausted every avenue available to us. If this cult only sent two followers to Solstheim to capture me, the numbers they command can't be too great. Otherwise, they would have attracted greater attention on their journey from Skyrim."

"They took Balmorra. A city of *hundreds*. We're two withered old elves and a Khajiit with more courage than working body parts. I just...I didn't think it would end this way."

"What do you mean?"

"I've always known I would have to go back." Nadene looked down at their clasped hands. "I escaped the first time when I killed Dagoth Ur. I left the island, thinking my duty fulfilled. Then Mehrunes Dagon's legions of Dremora pushed Vvardenfell to the edge, and Sheogorath's rogue moon knocked it off. And now Namira's followers force my return. This is the thanks I receive for toppling the false gods and restoring the Daedra. I know I have to die at Red Mountain, Gelebor. I just wish I hadn't fallen in love before the end."

"Hush." Gelebor let his forehead rest against hers. "You're not going to...do that. We've both travelled so far to get here. Years and years and oceans of blood. It's our turn to be happy, now."

We're going to leave Vvardenfell with Habinsinulu and Kharjo and go somewhere the gods can't find us. But you have to promise me you won't throw your life away."

"I won't. But you don't know where we're going. Vvardenfell was mostly a ruin *before* the mountain blew up. I can't imagine how awful it must be now."

"We'll get through it together," Gelebor said just as Kharjo made a noisy return. "Let's get packing. Wouldn't want to be late for your party."

"Oh, that would be *devastating*."

Author's Note: I've started college recently so unfortunately updates will now be every other Sunday, and hopefully longer than this chapter from now on. Please review if you continue to enjoy!

Three Candles, Part I

"Duty is to one's own honor, and to one's family and clan. Gravity is the essential seriousness of life. Life is hard, and events must be judged, endured, and reflected upon with due care and earnestness. Piety is respect for the gods, and the virtues they represent. A light, careless life is not worth living." - The Great Houses of Morrowind

Gusts of wind came down from the hills around the town and sent up great storms of dust. The gray filled the air and choked the sky, blocking out the light of the moons and even the distant twinkling stars. Orange lanterns, powered by magelight, shook helplessly in the onslaught, projecting their meager illumination into the empty streets of Raven Rock. Nothing living loved ash, save for yams and scatheclaw. The Dunmer drew their shutters against the wind, and some murmured prayers to those that were not their ancestors. The cloaked figure passing the Retching Netch didn't know the words to any such prayers, and so he walked the road in silence and darkness.

Gelebor almost savored the needling pain of the ash against his face. It felt like a cleansing, a torturous passage from one stage of his long life to the next terrifying chapter. For thousands of years he had clung to Auriel, painstakingly refreshing his memory whenever the ancient mantras and rituals began to slide away. Now he was endeavoring to forget the old tools of his faith as quickly as possible. The scar Auriel had left was beginning to scab over, though Gelebor knew that he still walked a fragile rope. *At least I don't have to walk alone, any longer.*

A figure cloaked in ash stepped out from the alley, blocking Gelebor's path. He gasped and reached for his mace, remembering too late that Nadene had insisted they leave their weapons behind at her house.

"So eager to cut down a city guard, n'wah?" The figure shouted over the winds.

"Oh. Ah, sorry." Gelebor relaxed a little, and cupped his hands over his eyes to block the ash. "It's awfully hard to see anything."

"What?"

"I said-"

"Never mind that." The wind died somewhat, and the ash settled with it. The guard's bonemold helmet faded into view, and Gelebor stared into a cruel black visor from which no light escaped. "There's a curfew. Councilor doesn't want any outlanders embarrassing the city during his little dinner."

"I'm on my way to First Councilor Morvayn's manor, actually."

"Are you, now," the guard drawled. "Pale elf like you, going to a House Redoran celebration? They don't much care for outlanders. Neither do I. Don't make me tell you to get lost again."

"There's no need for any of that. I was invited." Gelebor grinned slyly. For whatever reason, he felt braver than usual. "You can ask the Nerevarine. She's waiting for me, at the manor."

"I've heard stories of how Altmer treat their offspring. And that was before the Thalmor, mind you. Not sure how a lippy fetcher like you survived their purges."

"I'm not an Altmer. I'm a Snow Elf."

"You're not even drunk, are you? Just mad." The guard cocked his head, and reached for the black club at his side. "Well, fine. You be the Snow Elf, and I'll be the dwarf."

"Problem here, soldier?" A tall bare-headed Dunmer wearing the same armor as the guard materialized from the ash. Gelebor took a moment to recognize him.

"No, Captain Veleth. No problem." The guard straightened. "Just reminding this outlander of the Councilor's curfew."

Veleth squinted at Gelebor. "Hold on a blighted moment. I never forget a face. You're that sorry wretch I carried out of that warehouse, where Slitter and Mogrul met their end. Nerevarine was with you, if I'm not mistaken."

"That's right." Gelebor smiled nervously. "I'm going to meet her now, as a matter of fact."

"She's returned to Raven Rock? Well, I'll not soon forget the day I met the savior of Morrowind. And any friend of hers is a friend of mine. Let's get you on your way, now. First Councilor's manor, I'd wager? For the dinner?"

"Yes. Thank you." Gelebor followed Veleth down the road, and the other guard disappeared in the receding dust.

The cobblestones curved east, towards the coast and the sound of waves against the gray shore. Gelebor could taste the salt on the air. Lanterns were few and far between on the road, now, but Veleth seemed to know the path well. They'd already passed the way to the main docks. Gelebor recalled their unfortunate experience in trying to book passage to Vvardenfell, and shook his head. *Can't let my anger get away from me like that again. Otherwise, I won't be able to enjoy this new life for too much longer.*

"Hope you don't mind the trek," Veleth said, not turning his head. "Fortunate for me and the other guards, the First Councilor only stays up in his manor when we get visitors from the mainland. Elsewise it would a right pain in the arse to stretch our patrols out here."

"Oh?" Gelebor didn't much care to talk, his mind on Nadene and other pressing matters, but Veleth had pulled him out of a tough situation. "Any particular reason for that?"

"Councilor Morvayn's a humble mer." Veleth grinned, and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Says he prefers to live among his people, in their original residence in the heart of the city. You ask me, he doesn't like walking twenty leagues to buy a loaf of bread. But the Councilor wouldn't even have built the damned manor, if a few Blacklight nobles hadn't raised a stink about being made to stay in his son's old bedroom. Side effect of our successes, I suppose."

"Successes. Yes." Gelebor had certainly heard of Raven Rock's rise to riches, in the years since the Dragonborn returned the ebony mines to working order. He just had trouble believing the town could have been much worse before. "Oh! The Nerevarine wanted me to tell you something, if I were to see you before her."

"Aye?"

"In the course of our travels, we incapacitated a group of bandits based along the shore east of Tel Mithryn. You may want to go retrieve them before they find a way to escape. Or starve to death."

"Boethiah take me! I've had scouts watching those reavers since Rain's Hand. They were beginning to worry me. You and the Nerevarine took down that lot all by yourselves?"

"More or less."

"Wondrous. I'll make sure they're attended to, don't you worry."

They reached the top of the hill. Ash slipped beneath Gelebor's feet, and he hastily regained his balance. The Inner Sea filled the horizon and stretched beyond the clouds of ash plaguing Solstheim. Distant waves gleamed in the moonlight, rising and falling like a father's beckoning hand. Councilor Morvayn's manor was just before the beach. Gelebor had never seen anything like it in his life.

"Is that...a crab?"

"Aye. Well, a replica. And smaller than the real Emperor Crab's were, 'course. Not enough chitin left in Morrowind to build a monster like the Redoran lived under in old Ald'ruhn."

"I..." Gelebor looked from Veleth to the manor, and back again. "I don't understand."

"Thought you'd be used to that, by now, considering your chosen company." Veleth smiled and clapped Gelebor on the shoulder. "Be sure to tell the Nerevarine hello from me."

"Um...yes. Sure."

"Good mer."

"You're not attending the dinner?"

"Me? Ha." Veleth waved a hand at the strange structure below them. "Not enough sujamma on the island to convince me to spend my evening with those mainland s'wits. At least in the Netch, I can get drunk with people I like. And I don't have to worry about saying some damn foolish thing, or stepping on the wrong toes."

"Oh." Gelebor nervously fingered the collar of his cloak. "Farewell, then. Thanks for your assistance."

"Any time, outlander."

He watched Captain Veleth trudge down the slope back towards the dim lights of the city. In a minute, his silhouette had been swallowed completely by the ash and the darkness. The wind picked up, fierce and hot like the breath of a dragon. Gelebor shivered and turned his back to Raven Rock. Up on the hill, he almost felt on an island of his own. The manor was waiting. He felt the pull compelling him to move forward, the desire to return to Nadene's side and hear her voice again. But beneath that comforting thought was the fear, loose and rolling in his stomach.

Gelebor wondered if Nadene felt it too. The almost unbearable desire, the hunger to touch and to feel and to love, and the rest of his mind watching with equal measure terror and certainty. A disappointed guardian, watching a child trip over the same root over and over again. *When will I grow tired of the pain? I'll just lose her, like I lost my mother and father. Like I lost Vyrthur. Like I lost the Chantry.* If only that cruel certainty had been enough to still his heart, Gelebor was sure he could have slipped beneath the cool waters of Solstheim and finally been done with all this nonsense. But he remembered too well the feel of Nadene against him, and suddenly wanted nothing more than to see her again. He made his way carefully down the hill.

First Councilor Morvayn's manor seemed nearly as large as the entirety of Tel Mithryn. The stout beige structure stretched from one end of the beach to the other. No guards or gatekeepers came out to greet him, but a lantern near the base of the building lit up a large door. Gelebor passed

beneath the manor's thin moonshadow, and loosened his cloak slightly. He entered the manor after only a moment's hesitation.

"You lost, dear?" A tall, thin Dunmer asked. She leaned against the far wall. The foyer was sparsely decorated, and remarkably dark.

"No. I'm here for the dinner." Somewhere nearby, there was music playing. Gelebor shut the door behind him.

"I didn't ask why you came here." She moved towards him slowly, her hips swaying. "I asked if you were lost."

"Um. This is First Councilor Morvayn's manor, is it not?"

"Certainly is." The Dunmer stood before him, nearly his height. She wore a dark robe of burgundy, and golden bracelets on her wrists. "My poor lost little scribe. All wide-eyed and jumpy. Why don't you come to my room, sweetie?"

"I'm meeting someone here." Gelebor inched away from her. "The Nerevarine."

"Nerevarine? Oh, you sweet silly mer." She ghosted a hand over his face, and he caught scent of her perfume. Rich and cloying, like crushed nightshade. "That wench hasn't spoken to anyone but the betmer she brought with her. Keep me company instead, handsome. Let's slip away from this ridiculous gathering and go make our own fun."

"I really should be going." His back was to the wall. Gelebor swallowed, trying to avoid the Dunmer's hungry eyes. "She'll probably be worrying about me."

As if summoned by the thought, the door to the main hall opened and Nadene stepped through. The Dunmer didn't turn to look, but leaned in closer to Gelebor, blocking his view. He heard Nadene's quick footsteps, like frantic drumbeats.

"What in Oblivion is going on here?"

"Nothing that concerns you." The Dunmer waved her away. "Kindly fuck off, now. There are plenty of mer to go around. This one's mine."

"He doesn't belong to anyone." Nadene stepped closer, her fists clenched. "And he's my guest. So make like Vivec and disappear, or you'll be returning to Blacklight in a gilded urn."

"You filthy gutter worm," the Dunmer sneered. She moved away from Gelebor. "The others might not see it. Morvayn, Arano, and their ilk. But I know the truth. You don't belong here, and you never will. No matter how many cults you destroy. Who was your mother? A seamstress for a minor House? A guard in some backwater city?"

"Save it for your priest, flah." Nadene pushed past the mer and grabbed Gelebor's arm. "I stopped caring what Dunmer like you think a long time ago. Leave, now."

The Dunmer cast one last bitter glance at Gelebor before departing the foyer. As the door swung shut, Gelebor heard flashes of a mournful song. His eyes fell to Nadene, looking up at him, her brow creased with worry. *No. That's not quite right.* He gripped her shoulders, felt the firm muscles tense and relax, and kissed her softly.

"What was that for?" Nadene asked, a minute later. She smiled at him and licked her lips.

"I don't know." Gelebor's hands didn't leave her shoulders. *She has enough to worry about, without hearing my troubles.* "Just wanted to kiss you, was all. Shall we get to this dinner, at last?"

"Sure," She replied, studying his face. "I have to warn you: it's one of those traditional three-tier affairs. I'd forgotten some of the Redoran went in for that sort of thing. The last one of these I was at, Queen Barenziah was in attendance."

"I'm not sure what we're walking into." They walked towards the main hall. "Three tiers, you say?"

"Uh huh. Used to be for Almsivi. There were a lot of rituals and traditions associated with doing things in threes, back then. Some of them have stuck around for the new Tribunal."

"Anything I should know about specifically?"

"Just do what everyone else does. What the three tiers are mostly depends on who's in charge of the dinner. I think I saw the Archmaster standing around, so it'll probably be the Redoran words. Duty, gravity, piety, blah blah blah."

"Very well." They stood at the doorway. Gelebor swallowed and paused at the precipice. "I'm a bit nervous, Nadene. All these House Redoran elites...I know they take honor very seriously."

"That's fine, because I don't take any of these elites seriously at all." Nadene rubbed his shoulder. "An honorable Dunmer is like a "Good Daedra" in their blighted system of worship. You have more honor in your pinky finger than all the fetchers under this crab shell put together."

"I just don't want to embarrass you in front of your House."

"No. Listen to me." Nadene turned and stood on her tip toes, grabbing Gelebor's chin. She stared him in the eyes. "They're not my House. I want to spend time with you, not these uptight sycophants. That's why we came here. To have one last happy moment before Vvardenfell. After we save Habi, I'm leaving Morrowind. You're going to take me to someplace cold, remember? I'm hoping to never see another Redoran Guard again. Okay?"

"Okay." Gelebor smiled weakly. "Thank you for saying so. I'll try to relax more."

"Terrific." She stroked his cheek and turned away. The warmth of her touch lingered like a pleasant burn. "Oh, and I hope it goes without saying: please don't say my name in front of anyone. I don't want any of these mer tracking me down for help with their petty problems. And, uh, don't mention I killed the previous Tribunal."

"There go all my conversation topics," He said. Nadene grinned and pushed open the door. Gelebor steeled his heart and followed her into the darkness.

Three Candles, Part II

"I remember. I do not feel it. I can, if I choose, remember the feeling. But I do not choose. It is very, very sad being mortal. There is happiness, yes. But mostly sadness. As I have said, "Count only the happy hours." For mortals, they are all too few. But for gods - for me - there is no more feeling. Only knowing." - Vivec

Candlelight filled the great room, and cast flickering shadows on the far walls of the shell. Dozens of Dunmer dressed in crimson and tan stood around the small round tables arranged meticulously throughout the hall. Some of them held earthenware jars of drink and engaged in conversation with those around them. Some sat quietly and looked towards the dais at the center of the room, where three richly attired figures stood. In the corner nearest to the door, a mer played a harp. The low notes flowed slowly in the cavernous space and seemed to come from every direction at once. The scent of heavy spirits and fragrant candlesmoke filled the room.

"Eerie, isn't it?" Nadene took off towards the end of the hall, and Gelebor followed. "Two hundred years, and the Redoran still can't throw a party without some measure of pain involved. The best we can hope for is some dancing later."

"I don't think I know how to dance."

"Don't worry. In this kind of light, no one'll be able to tell the difference." They came to a table half draped in darkness, where Kharjo sat nursing a large glass bottle. "Look who it is, Kharjo. He almost got carried away by that tall crone with the bracelets."

"Shameful." Kharjo shook his head. "Khajiit suspects this elf would never admit it, but when he went to get a drink she tried to seduce him as well. He nearly had to brandish his claws."

"Talk about a missed opportunity." Nadene and Gelebor sat. He was glad to have a rest, after the long walk from Raven Rock. "You might have accidentally made this dinner interesting."

"I have had my fill of 'interesting' for this life, friend." Kharjo passed her the bottle. "Dull will do, for a time. No one ever died on a dull night."

"True enough," Gelebor chimed in. "Look. I think something's happening, on the dais."

The most physically imposing of the three gathered Dunmer stepped ahead of the others. All sound in the hall died in an instant.

"That's the Archmaster," Nadene whispered.

"I am a mer of few words," the Archmaster began. "And Councilor Morvayn is eager to begin. So I will keep this short. House Redoran gathers again, two centuries after the cataclysm that reshaped the world. We have endured. We have met the challenges of the Daedra and emerged from the other side with wounds immeasurable. Now Redoran stands as the most powerful of the Houses. Many have risen to strike at Morrowind in the past. The Nords, the Dwemer, the Sixth House. Dagon's legions, and the Argonians to the south. Now a new threat rises in the West, more dangerous than any we've faced. The Khajiit and Bosmer have already fallen. Cyrodiil, Skyrim, and Hammerfell have been ravaged by conflict and ruin. Someday soon we will stand alone. The fate of Resdayn is in our hands, brothers and sisters. We will not become a puppet of discord and disharmony. Morrowind will triumph in the wars to come, or Morrowind will burn."

The Archmaster stepped away, and excited murmuring rose in the gathered Redoran.

"Kharjo must admit, he is impressed."

"Talk is easy enough," Nadene said quietly. She drummed her fingers on the table. "I'm sure there were similar speeches in Elsweyr and Valenwood, so many years ago now. No one *wants* to submit to the Dominion."

"Morrowind may have an advantage, no?" Kharjo continued. "This country has already suffered many trials. The High Elves took my land by exploiting the faithful, but the Dark Elves have already been tricked in this way by their own kind. And the Thalmor seized Valenwood with a coup. I sense the people of this land would not turn easily against House Redoran, and no other faction has a comparable force of armed warriors. And should the Dominion come in force, they will be fighting in a land where the very air is hostile to their race."

"You've put a bit of thought into this," Gelebor remarked. "I didn't realize you were so into politics."

"Not politics, Knight-Paladin." Kharjo's whiskers twitched. "Life. Survival. There is a reason Khajiit chose to remain in Raven Rock while conducting his hunt, rather than return to Skyrim where he has friends and refuge. The same reason the Namira cultists have gone to Vvardenfell, he suspects. The Dominion and their associates do not interfere here. There are no battles yet, no rebellions or purges. Morrowind will someday be an enclave of desperation for those in the East who fear Thalmor entanglements."

"I just hope I'm far away when that day comes," Nadene said. "I'm done bleeding for the Dunmer, and I'm done watching them bleed. Maybe Divayth has the right idea with Black Marsh. I heard the Argonians gave Dagon a right thrashing during the Crisis."

"Not very cold there, though," Gelebor pointed out.

"Different kind of heat, at least. Bet it's good for growing plants."

"Thank you, my friends and countrymen, for making the long journey to Raven Rock," Councilor Morvayn spoke at the dais. "Five years ago, this island was a long forgotten shadow of progress, near unworthy of being an outpost of Redoran. So much has changed since those dark days."

Someone snorted at a table near Gelebor, and then there was an angry whisper and the sound of an open hand against skin.

"Unfortunately." Morvayn cleared his throat. "Unfortunately, the mer responsible for so much of our success can not stand among us on this day of celebration. Jaxius Amaton. The Nords called him Dragonborn. As far as my dealings with him went, I knew him only to be a loyal servant of House Redoran. He uncovered a plot to assassinate me and wrest control of Solstheim from our House. Without him, none of us would be here today. Amaton exemplified our sacred words in his every action. We must never forget."

He raised his cup. Every Redoran in the hall did the same, with much clinking of glassware and sloshing of liquid.

Nadene had no drink, which Gelebor thought was probably for the best, so she just crossed her arms and glared in the general direction of Councilor Morvayn. Kharjo took one look at her and wisely kept his cup on the table.

"Duty. Gravity. Piety." Morvayn bowed his head.

"Duty, gravity, piety," the rest of them repeated with some measure of cohesion.

"Fetcher lived in Skyrim most of the time," Nadene whispered. "I bet his idea of gravity was shouting someone off a mountain."

Her idea of a whisper seemed fairly different to his. A third of the heads in the room swiveled to look in their direction, and Gelebor smiled politely.

"Speaking of our words," Morvayn continued. "I've chosen them as the three tiers of the dinner tonight. A tired choice, some of you may be thinking. I prefer to see them as tried and true. And where better to celebrate our most cherished beliefs, than under a crab shell constructed in the fashion of old Under-Skar? The first word is duty. Duty to our honor, to our clan, to our faith. Anyone can preach of their duty when everyone is watching. But the true bearer of honor follows the true path even in darkness."

Every candle in the hall went out at once. There was excited whispering and the squeaking of many chairs. Mer were moving around in the gloom.

"Wow. Turning out the lights. Real creative, Morvayn." Nadene spoke. "Must have blown all his gold on the construction."

"The effect is somewhat wasted on Kharjo," Kharjo said. "He can see many Dark Elves stumbling around like blind kittens."

"I'm tempted to cast a sight spell, myself." Gelebor could almost feel Nadene studying him in the darkness. "But we should play along. Might be fun." Her voice turned up at the end, almost questioning.

"Yes," Gelebor agreed. "Let's go."

They felt for each other's hands across the table.

"I'm always surprised when I touch you," Nadene said. They moved carefully in the direction of faint lights in the center of the room. "I expect you to be cold. But you're warmer than I am."

"Life is warm," Gelebor replied. "My brother told me that, once. Everything that truly lives is burning hot. Men, elves, slaughterfish, dragons. He said it's the light of Auriel inside them."

"Do you still believe that?"

"Belief has naught to do with it." They were close enough now that Gelebor could see many round tables set in a circle, with glowing plates atop each. "My sovereign is the most powerful entity in creation. My loyalty to him changed nothing, and my lack of loyalty changes less still."

"I just don't understand, sometimes." She took a deep breath. "How you can still think that way, after so many years wasted on that bastard. You threw off the yoke of servitude. That has to *mean* something. "

"I suppose I'm still trying to figure that part out. There's no precedent for this, Nadene. No one in the Chantry ever left, you know. Such an act was unthinkable. It's just...when you've been one way for so long, it's hard to change. There's no one out there who can help me."

"Oh?" Her hand fell away from his grasp. "I used to think that way, once. Didn't seem to really get me very far. I'm going to go try to find Morvayn, see if I can't knock some sense into him concerning Vvardenfell. You go mingle, okay?"

"Err, very well." But Nadene had already gone. He had the sinking feeling he'd failed some sort of

test. *But damn, how am I meant to know what to say?* There seemed to be a thousand conflicts in his head, now, all fighting for dominance in the mess of emotions and broken beliefs.

Thousands of years guarding the Forgotten Vale had not prepared him for navigating romantic situations. *And now I stand alone in the darkness, amidst this celebration of a people not my own.* It was remarkable how lonely one could be made to feel, in a massive crab shell stuffed with elves. Every scent and sound Gelebor didn't recognize depressed him further, reinforced the omnipresent belief that he simply didn't belong in a place like this. He imagined Kharjo must be feeling similarly, and felt a pang of sympathy for his friend.

Gelebor's stomach rumbled. He pushed aside his stresses and surrendered to the biological side of his nature. One of the tables with glowing dishware seemed to call to him. He sat before a steaming bowl that seemed to be some variation of crab stew. Fortunately, the light of the enchanted ceramic was bright enough to assure the spoon's safe passage to his mouth. Gelebor indulged himself for nearly a minute before noticing someone had joined him at the table. The figure's upper body was cloaked in shadow, but two gray hands rested on the silk spread.

"Oh, greetings. Pardon me, I was distracted."

"Remarkably so, my boy."

"But it couldn't be." Gelebor set his spoon down and studied the darkness. "Lord Fyr?"

"Quite right. Came to check in on you children, before the midnight excitement is upon us. Left a few atronachs behind with Athtera and the scribes. Nadene's thrown you to the nix hounds and scurried off, eh?"

"Not at all," Gelebor replied, and regretted the sharpness in his voice. "She's gone to speak to Councilor Morvayn about obtaining some assistance for our upcoming trip."

"Little chance of that, I can tell you now." Divayth delicately sipped his stew. "Redoran built their capital city on Vvardenfell a stone's throw from Dagoth Ur's fortress, but for all their preaching of honor and duty it was the outlander Nerevarine who came to save them from the Sixth House. She had to cut down their Archmaster just to be named Hortator. Surprised the new one invited Nadene here at all."

"I believe it was Morvayn who did that, actually." Gelebor scratched his chin. "Say, how did you get in here? Being a Telvanni?"

"Do you really have to ask?" Divayth chuckled. "If this was a House concerned with security, one of their dinner tiers wouldn't involve putting out all the lights. That's one point in the Redoran's favor. If this were a Telvanni or Hlaalu event, you'd find more than a few very stiff guests after relighting the candles. Maybe there's something to their rambling about honor. Too bad for them it only works if everyone in the room agrees it does."

"That is a shame."

They ate in companionable silence. Around the room there was the rustle of cloth and clinking of silverware, indicating the other diners in the dark. There were hushed conversations and excited whispers. Gelebor still wasn't sure how not being able to see nourished his sense of duty, but the Dunmer, at least, seemed to be enjoying themselves. He wondered if Nadene had found Councilor Morvayn yet.

"You and Nadene have become quite close," Divayth remarked. "And no, that's not a question."

"Well." Gelebor looked down into his bowl. "Seems you know everything about it. What is it you want from me?"

"Settle down. And remember who you speak to, son. I'm just looking out for my best patient."

"I apologize." Gelebor put down his spoon and ran a hand down his face. "It's true. Nadene...I like her. I like her a lot. But I don't know what I'm doing, Lord Fyr. I think I'm going to spoil it all. And then...then, I'm going to die. Because I can't go back to how it was before. Not anymore."

"I told you to call me Divayth." He leaned forward, so the tip of his crooked nose and the faint glow of his eyes were just visible out of the gloom. "Listen to me, now. I won't drop to such levels of sentiment for just anyone. I've known the Nerevarine for longer than any other living being. A long time ago, she was just a sick girl who stumbled into my tower. A bright girl, well-meaning. Naive. I was certain, so certain, that she'd be a permanent resident of my Corpusarium. But Nadene left my front gates as cured as any corpus victim I've ever seen. And I never saw that girl again."

Gelebor forgot his stew entirely, and waited curiously for Divayth to continue.

"The girl died at Red Mountain, you see? Or maybe sometime before that. When she found out what the Tribunal did, maybe." Divayth leaned back, and rummaged around in his pockets.

"Damnation. Left my kreshweed behind. Anyway, back to what I was saying. The girl died. Nadene carries three souls in her, from my perspective. Indoril Nerevar, our beloved general, murdered by the Tribunal. Nadene Othryn, the young Dunmer girl from Cyrodiil, who stepped off the boat in Seyda Neen and was killed by the truth. And then...the woman who you travel with. Bitter. Lonely. Furious. Mostly at beings who are long dead."

"So what do I do?" Gelebor wrung his hands on the tablecloth. "Tell me how to help her. Please."

"Only Nadene can save Nadene. I saw the girl I tried to cure return a few times, during your stay at Tel Mithryn. Mostly when she spoke of you, or spoke to you. Everyone wants to be happy, I've learned. Some of us just make it remarkably hard for ourselves. Either because we think we deserve the pain, or because we've forgotten how to love." Divayth sniffed. "Gah. Listen to me. Prattling on like a priest of Mara. Here is what you can do for my patient, Gelebor. Stand by her, no matter what happens. Listen to her troubles, and reassure her of your love. And never forget that you're in a partnership. When Nadene wants to help you, let her come past your shield. Even when it hurts."

"I...I will." Gelebor's thoughts caught on that word: *love*. "I'll do my best."

"Don't do your best. Do what I say." Divayth stood. "I believe this tier is coming to an end. I'll see you again at Tel Mithryn. Good luck, snow elf."

"Thank you."

The candles lit up one by one, casting their circles of faint brilliance like an armada of lighthouses in a boundless oily sea. The talk around the manor gradually ceased. There were many tables around him with Dunmer couples sitting across from each other, but no sign of Nadene. And Divayth had vanished without so much as a puff of smoke. *Maybe she's gone the same way.*

"So concludes the first stage." Morvayn spoke again from the dais. Gelebor searched the faces around him for Nadene, with no success. "I hope your discussions in the dark were, shall we say, illuminating?"

There was no response from the sitting Redoran. Evidently, this was not a House that went in for pity laughter. Second Councilor Arano coughed pointedly.

"Well. Right, then. On to the second tier. Gravity. The essential seriousness of life. We must judge, endure, and reflect upon our hardships with due care and earnestness. And what better way to consider the gravity of a situation, than to fall into the arms of the one you trust the most? Oftentimes, I've found that the solution to a problem comes to me when I've already surrendered to my own helplessness. Move closer to your loved ones, my friends. Consider your trials and troubles as you dance in the candlelight."

Redoran guards came out to move the tables to the outer boundaries of the room, and the councilors and other elites began pairing off. The harpist began a slightly more exciting course of music, and the light notes filled the smoky air. Gelebor stood outside the circle of dancers, feeling a bit lost. He saw Kharjo with the tall braceleted Dunmer who'd tried to seduce him at the front doors. They were swaying side to side near the center of the room. Gelebor caught Kharjo's eye and tugged part of his cloak aside to reveal the armor underneath. He tapped the white steel and raised an eyebrow. Kharjo smiled, his fangs revealed, and shook his head.

"No one to dance with, mate?" A voice asked. Gelebor turned to see a thin Dunmer man in formal clothes sitting in one of the few chairs still around. "Take a seat. No use standin' around like a conjurer's forgotten pet."

"Not a bad idea." Gelebor sat. "From what part of Morrowind do you come from?"

"Blacklight, m'lord. Name's Traldus. But I'm no councillor, no sir. A harpist, I am."

"Oh?"

"Oh's right." Traldus crossed his legs and pointed off into the distance. "On break, now. My son's takin' over for a little while. Good lad. Really knows how to pull a string."

"I would certainly say so," Gelebor responded politely. "You must be a fine teacher."

"Hah. More like, he's becomin' a fine player despite my scrib-brained teachin'. Expect he'll be better than me, in a year or so." Traldus held up his fingers. "Got the shakes, you see? Started happenin' 'round my hundredth."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Gelebor glanced at the crowd, still looking for Nadene. "Have you considered seeking a mage or a healer for help?"

"On what I make? That's a laugh. 'Course, it doesn't help that our s'wit Archmaster isn't payin' me a blighted coin for this dinner."

"That doesn't seem like House Redoran's way." Gelebor frowned, now giving Traldus his full attention. "Surely you're being recompensed in some manner for your work."

"Naw." Traldus chuckled nervously, and looked around in the manner of one preparing to divulge some great secret. "The Archmaster get me out of a trouble spot a few years back, and the fetcher's been holdin' it over my head. Gets a free night of playin' every now and then."

"That doesn't seem particularly honorable."

"Them words didn't mean much when Redoran wasn't at the top of the mountain. Now there's all sorts of wheelin' and dealin' behind the scenes. I've seen a lot, living in Blacklight. Things you wouldn't believe. This House has a dark side, believe you me. 'Spose it was inevitable."

"I don't follow."

"Well, makes sense, don't it? Redoran had to change, after Ald'ruhn fell. Change or die. Took a little of Hlaalu, a little of Telvanni. Even a little of the Legion, though you won't get any of these fetchers to admit it. And now look at 'em." Traldus closed his eyes and let the sounds of the harp wash over him. "Look at *us*, I ought say. I'm Redoran whether I like it or not. Change or die, mate."

"Hey!" Nadene emerged from a circle of candlelight, her black dress slightly wrinkled. "I've been looking all over for you. Who's this?"

"Harpist," Traldus answered. "My son's playin', now. Real good, ain't he?"

"He's lovely." Nadene grabbed Gelebor's hands. "Come on. I'm sick of dancing with mer who want something from me."

"How do you know I don't want something?" Gelebor let her lead them to an open spot among the dancers. Here, the harp was louder and the candlesmoke more hazy.

"Difference there is, whatever you want..." Nadene moved his hands to her hip and lower back, and looked up at him. "I might want it too."

They moved slowly, comfortably, like two netches swaying over a beach of ash. He found it easy enough to mimic Nadene's movements, though he did step on her foot once or twice.

"Sorry," Gelebor said quietly.

"I'm sorry, too." Nadene rested her head on his chest. "For earlier, when I left you alone. I just can't stand it, sometimes. You know? Thinking about the gods, and all they've done to us."

"I understand why you're angry." Gelebor rubbed her back. "You just need to know...Auriel, the Chantry, the Vale...they'll always be a part of me. Of who I am. There are parts I *want* to remember. My childhood, some of the priests I knew. I loved my brother, Nadene. I never would have made it here without Vyrthur."

"You're right." Nadene bit her lip. "There are people from Vvardenfell I wouldn't like to forget, either. I just hate looking back at those unhappy times, now that we have each other."

"I don't think the past can't hurt us." Gelebor smiled. "Lord Fyr made an appearance, earlier."

"Really?" Red eyes blinked up at him. "Anything to worry about?"

"No. He just imparted some wise advice."

They swayed in harmony. Gelebor felt the warmth of her skin through the dress, and everything else in the hall seemed to fall away. The other dancers, the lovely harp, the scent of candles and drink.

"I'm dreadfully afraid. I meant to tell you earlier, but you already looked so stressed."

"What are you so scared of?"

"That I'll lose you." Gelebor swallowed. "That what we have is doomed to ruin."

"Of course it is. That's why it's precious, you sweet fool. I've done a lot of thinking, these past few weeks. About why I chose to be alone for so long." Nadene reached up and stroked his cheek. "It was that same terror, that you're feeling right now. The fear of loss. But now I've come to an

understanding, I think."

"And what's that?" Gelebor bent his head.

"Everything ends, Gelebor. Everyone dies. And that's okay."

"I love you, Nadene."

"Show me."

Gelebor bent lower and met her lips, and his hands tightened on her waist. His insides turned to mush and a dreamlike calm filled every iota of the space around. All his worries and haunting memories faded away, and in that instant he couldn't imagine ever being bothered by them again. Not while he was with Nadene. He closed his eyes and surrendered to the warmth of her mouth against his, and thought: *this is the greatest moment of my life*.

"I love you too." She smiled, her cheeks flushed. "Now kiss me again."

He happily obeyed, and they remained in each other's arms until Councilor Morvayn came to the dais again and all movement around them stilled.

"I hope you've all had a pleasant time so far," Morvayn said. "We arrive at the final tier. Piety. Respect for the gods, and the virtues they represent. On this night we will remember our ancestors. Every Dunmer must know that they stand on the ashes of thousands who have come before. Reach into your satchels and backpacks, and take out the ash masks of your honored dead. Wear them proudly, and join my family in sacred prayer. Or retire to the outer boundaries of the hall, should you wish to conduct your worship in private or obtain some small refreshments."

"Ash masks?" Gelebor asked.

"Molds of the faces of the deceased," Nadene said, half-smiling. "Rich families have them made special before putting their dead to rest. So many of them lost access to their tombs after the Red Year. It's a relatively new tradition. Trying to rebuild some of what was lost, you know."

"Interesting." Gelebor noted she didn't speak with the usual bitterness she demonstrated towards her people. He remembered Divayth's words. *Sometimes, the girl returns*. "Do you have a mask?"

"Nope," Nadene said. Her smile wavered. "Orphan, remember?"

"I remember." He pulled her closer, and stroked her hair. "I prefer this way. I like your face, quite a lot. Why cover it up?"

"Oh, what a charmer." Nadene laughed and pulled him away from the dispersing dancers. Many were wearing their ash masks now, and Gelebor couldn't help but find the sight unsettling. Rigid gray shapes, the faces of Dunmer no longer in this world, greeted him in every direction. Some had rubies placed over the eyes, in a grim facsimile of living mer.

They stopped near a few empty tables at the edge of the hall.

"I'm going to go get a few drinks, maybe try to find Kharjo." Nadene squeezed his hand. "Go find us a good seat, not too close to any of the mask wearers. Prayer depresses me."

"Got it." Gelebor was reluctant to let go of her hand. He watched her disappear into the crowd, his heart singing.

He searched for a good spot, distantly wondering if Elder Othreloth was in attendance. The piety stage of this dinner had certainly brought him to mind. *I've so much to share. If Auriel wanted me to find out for myself why I'm still here, I have an answer for him.*

"Gelebor," A reedy voice called out. Traldus the harpist was beckoning him towards a table. He was wearing an ash mask of his own. "C'mere, mate."

Gelebor didn't particularly want to talk to this mer, but it would probably be rude to decline his invitation. He joined Traldus.

"Enjoy your dancin'?" Traldus sat stiffly, his head turned slightly away. "Quite the lass you've got, I saw."

"I had a good time." Gelebor grinned. "A wonderful time, actually. How about you?"

"Oh, y'know. Ups and downs."

Gelebor laughed politely.

"What's funny?"

"Err. Was that not a joke about dancing?"

"Oh. 'Course it was." Traldus' head fell forward slightly, so wisps of his long black hair fell over his mask. "Glad you've had a pleasant time. You're going to want to hold on to those memories."

"Pardon me?" Gelebor studied Traldus' posture. "Have you hurt your back, my friend? The mer I'm with knows a simple healing spell."

"Knows more than that, I'd wager." The mask on the harpist's face slid down, revealing one of his eyes. The red pupil stared sightlessly, enlarged in the candlelight. "Maybe necromancy."

"I don't think so." Gelebor registered in some distant corner of his mind that Traldus had learned how to pronounce the "g's" at the end of words. "None of that, no."

"Maybe how to make a dead man talk, so you can lure someone in close. So you can close your hand around his ankle."

"I..." Gelebor felt long, cold fingers touch him. "Please."

"She knows teleportation. I've been watching for a while. Pretty useful spell, it seems. And not too difficult to copy."

The mask fell off of Traldus. Bloody saliva dripped from the dead mer's lip onto the tablecloth below.

"Gelebor?" Nadene stared at them, eyes wide. She held two glasses. The sound from the harp abruptly ceased. There was a flash of fur somewhere beyond Nadene, as Kharjo sprinted across the hall.

"Sanyon," The corpse of Traldus corrected. "You killed my friend, remember?"

"Hold on-"

"Time for Vvardenfell at last, dear. The day of prophecy nears, and Namira has been waiting ever so patiently."

The fingers around Gelebor's ankle tightened, and the glasses fell from Nadene's hands. He reached for her, desperately, futilely, as the air around him was sucked away. His hand brushed the fabric of her dress, cool and light.

He didn't hear the glasses shatter.

Splitting of the Breast

The area of the Vvardenfell in which the fabled valley was nestled would have once been called the Ashlands, for the dry and desolate plains of gray that stretched to the east and west and all the way to the rocky shore and the Sea of Ghosts. Now all of the island was ash and ruin, but the Dunmer living in the small camp nestled along the sides of the Valley of Wind still called themselves Ashlanders and spoke the language of their ancestors.

Long fingers of rock stretched into the sky and touched the bottom of the moons. Sakani peeked out of the opening of her yurt and licked her lips. There wasn't much time, now. Dawn was nearly upon the Urshilaku camp. With the rising sun, justice would be done at last. She turned back to the tools of her faith, the countless small artifacts and fragrant jars that littered her living space and lined the thin walls of her yurt. Tall candles cast a blood-red light across the gathered items. Sakani moved slowly, but with purpose. She knelt down, pushing some vials aside, and from a weathered satchel she withdrew a long golden dagger of Dwemer craft.

If you manage to live to an old age on Vvardenfell, its because you learned to notice sounds most Dunmer do not. Such as, the noise of armored feet stepping through ash. Sakani heard the Ashkhan approaching, and held the dagger behind her back as he stepped into her yurt. *So predictable.*

"Azura has naught to say to you, Zanilath." Sakani scowled. "She is disappointed. So am I. "

"I came not for your counsel as a Wise Woman. I came in the name of our old friendship." Zanilath's bare chest gleamed in the candlelight. This was a mer of strength. Or at least, he had been. The symbols etched on his skin spoke of victory in battle and triumph over ruin, but Sakani knew better. "I beg of you. Bring this madness to an end."

"This is out of my control. 'Twas your tainted blood that brought this darkness on the valley. First one of your sons disappears, along with the others like him. Traitors to Azura."

Zanilath grimaced. "You can not know he went to Red Mountain. Many an Ashlander has fallen to beasts in the wild, during a hunt or by simple accident."

"Silence! You will not deceive me. That child was strong. His bones do not rest in some creature's nest. Azura has blessed me with a vision. Your firstborn commits wicked crimes in the bowels of Red Mountain, gorging himself on Dunmer flesh."

"No!" Zanilath stepped forward, his fists clenched. He had brought no weapon with him into the yurt. *Fool. He proves his weakness with every action.*

"Your line is corrupted, Ashkhan." Sakani's fingers tightened on the hilt of the dagger. "The second boy, caught trying to slip away from the valley in the night. To join his fallen brother, no doubt."

"Ammu was frightened, damn you!"

"Only enemies of the goddess have need to fear."

"What of the Telvanni?" Zanilath's eyes narrowed. "We all saw what happened to the wizards. They did nothing to Azura."

Sakani hissed and turned away, careful to keep her weapon hidden. "Do not speak to me of the n'wah to the east. Better for Namira to gorge herself on them, so we may be spared."

"You call them n'wah, like we do not share a common skin."

"When the fires fell from the sky, those who fled Resdayn were forsaken in the eyes of Azura. Now they return, slinking back to take our ancestral lands. The Telvanni and the Redoran will spread like a plague, just as they did before. The lives of all who turn away from Azura and the Nerevarine are forfeit."

"You go too far, woman. I have let this usurpation of power go on long enough. You will tell the devout guardians to release my son, and then you will leave the Urshilaku forever."

"Azura's most loyal disciple will not become a mabrigash."

"Become whatever you wish." Zanolath towered over her. He smelled sharply of sweat, nearly overpowering the burning incense. His eyes bore into her. "But do it far away from my people, witch."

"Blood always tells." Sakani smiled, the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes turning up. "Your traitorous children will not join their ancestors, Ashkhan. They will rot in the acid pits of the Scuttling Void."

Zanolath's blow sent her to the ground. Blood dripped from her lip, and one of her front teeth was loose. A vial had broken under her; glass shards were scattered in the ash. But the salt and iron in her mouth tasted of victory. Her knees popped as she rose and brought her hand around from behind her back.

"Wait-" Sakani stuck Zanolath with the dagger once, twice, three times in the chest. The air burst from his lungs before any words could escape. He fell like a hackle-lo leaf before the scythe. Sakani ignored his grasping fingers and pitiful gasps, and stepped over him. More footsteps, from outside. Small fingers curled around the opening to the yurt, and a child's head peeked inside. *Eldrus. Blood of my daughter.*

Eldrus gasped. Sakani grabbed his shoulder and pulled him inside, squeezing tight on trembling arms. The boy had weathered twelve long summers, now. It was high time he learned the price of weakness.

"The ashkhan thought he could murder me in my bed," Sakani spoke into his ear. "But Azura protects her faithful. She is watching over all of us, child. Do you feel her gaze?"

"I..." Eldrus nodded mutely, his eyes fixed on Zanolath's still form. "He was gonna kill you?"

"He was a servant of Namira. Just like his children. The n'wah who came to Vvardenfell have spread their sickness even to our humble tribe. We must cut out the rot, while we have Azura's attention." Sakani grabbed a handful of the boy's shirt and cleaned Zanolath's blood off the dagger. To his credit, Eldrus did not shy away.

"You mean Ammu?"

"Forget that name! And the name of his father. They have lost the right to our words. Them, and the other two servants of the enemy. All bleed and die in the dawn's light."

"But grandmother." Eldrus swallowed. "It's dawn now."

"Then there is no time to waste. Go feed the stranger, and then tell the others to gather on the ridge."

Eldrus bowed his head and left the yurt. Sakani slid her dagger into one of the folds of her robes, and glanced distastefully at the cooling corpse at her feet. *You were always weak, Zanilath. Unfit to lead the Urshilaku. I knew the day would come when you would break.* Events would move quickly. No one would dare stand against the lady of twilight, now that the ashkhan and his sons had been exposed and punished. Sakani felt the goddess summoning her; a tickling at the back of her consciousness, like the legs of an insect scrambling against glass. She knew from experience it would become an itch and then a burn if she didn't answer. Sakani knelt, her knees sticky, and opened her mind to Azura.

Kharjo strapped the last satchel onto the guar's back, and patted the grunting beast reassuringly. The moonshadow of the Bulwark fell on them. Nadene stood next to the other guar, finishing off her own buckles. She wore glass armor from neck to toe. Mere minutes had passed since Knight-Paladin Gelebor vanished from the manor of First Councilor Lleril Morvayn, and Kharjo still felt on edge and eager to find his friend. He was sure the Nerevarine felt just as agitated.

"Just a patrol. Three or four guards, I beg of you." Councilor Morvayn pleaded with Nadene.

"No." She pulled on Ur's backpack, testing the buckles.

"Please. In my personal residence, an honored guest of yours was taken by agents of darkness." Morvayn held a hand to his heart. "For what you've done for Morrowind, House Redoran can never repay you. Let us assist with this matter."

"You're right." Nadene climbed on to Ur. Kharjo copied her movements with his own strange steed. "You can never repay me. And your guards will just slow us down. If you want to help, send soldiers to Vvardenfell. Like I asked you to in the first place."

She lightly slapped Ur's side and the guar set off at a steady pace. Kharjo did his best to follow, unsure at first of how exactly a guar was controlled. Fortunately, Alma seemed content enough to trail after her mate. They passed beneath the towering Bulwark and the bonemold-armored figures standing above like statues. Ash kicked up behind the guar, nearly obscuring Morvayn. Kharjo glanced back, and saw the Councilor watching them go with a grim expression on his face.

The guar jogged down the road from the city. The satchels and packs shook and their contents clattered, but nothing fell from the beasts and the straps held firm. Secunda and Masser were high in the dark sky, and the heat was a smothering blanket. Kharjo supposed it was near midnight, now. *Near the hour of our original planned rendezvous with Divayth, no?*

"Where does our road lead us?" Kharjo didn't have to speak too loudly. The only sounds on the road were the plodding of guar feet and the muffled rattling of their gear. Nevertheless, the Nerevarine didn't appear to have heard him.

"Hello? Did you hear? Khajiit thinks it would be a good idea for us to speak of our current goals."

"Find Gelebor." Nadene didn't turn her head. "What else?"

"I can not say I know the Knight-Paladin as you do," Kharjo said carefully. "Scarcely a week has passed since our first meeting. But know that I fear for his life as well, and I have seen with my own eyes what horrors these cultists are capable of."

"He's still on the island. Not even I could teleport to Vvardenfell from Raven Rock." She held up a hand, her fingers splayed out like a web. "The aetherial conduits are difficult to navigate under perfect conditions. Even the Mages Guild had special guides assigned to transport members

between chapters. The lines have to be maintained and looked after, like herbs in a garden. I can't imagine the state of Vvardenfell's network after all this time." She smiled bitterly. "Listen to me talk. You probably don't even remember the Guild, do you? They would have dissolved nearly a century before your birth."

"Khajiit follows your words well enough." He guided Alma over a dip in the road. "You say this necromancer could not have left Solstheim immediately. He must have a boat waiting somewhere."

Nadene nodded. "If this n'wah was watching us well enough to replicate my spells, he must have been close to Raven Rock. We need to watch the coast. Look for any signs of disturbance in the ash."

This was easier said than done, given that the wind was kicking up dust in clouds at an almost constant rate.

"Should we not enlist Lord Fyr's assistance?"

"If we make it to Tel Mithryn without finding Gelebor," Nadene said. "He'll be gone. To Vvardenfell. To be murdered and eaten, just like Habisinulu."

"Do not count your dead so hastily. We will need our strength for the road ahead. Whatever fate befalls the Knight-Paladin, Vvardenfell awaits us."

"If something happens to Gelebor..." Ur stopped for the first time in a while. Alma followed his lead. Nadene looked out over the waters of the Inner Sea, her face unreadable. "I don't know. I can't go back to living alone in the woods. If we're too late for him, then I may have to leave you alone. It will be selfish, and it will be cruel. But I'm just not strong enough anymore. I'm tired. Of fighting, of crying over the dead...of everything."

"Khajiit understands."

"I opened my heart. Perhaps that was a mistake."

"What happened was not your fault." Kharjo rested a hand on her shoulder. "I don't regret my love for Zaynabi, or our kittens. The hole in me, now that they are gone, will never be healed by magic or time. Some say that it gets better. They lie, or simply do not know. But that is the danger of sharing yourself with others, Nadene."

"You're one to talk." Nadene raised her head, a cruel glint in her eye. "You really think your mate would want you out in this wasteland, half a world away from your home, trying to hunt down a woman who has likely already forgotten what her cult did to your family?"

Kharjo stiffened. His hand fell away. "Zaynabi is dead. What she wants matters no longer."

"I don't know what you looked like when Gelebor saw you for the first time. But when the guards pulled your carcass out of that warehouse, you had one foot in the grave, pal. Without our help, you'd have ended up food for ash hoppers. Or a bloated corpse floating down to Horker Island. Whatever you thought you were doing, it wasn't working."

"You speak of matters you do not understand." Kharjo turned away from her, his mind buzzing unpleasantly.

"Me, not understand? I've seen more good folks die than you'll ever meet in your short little life. I watched lava race down the slopes of Red Mountain and swallow villages in seconds. Entire bloodlines washed away like grains of sand. The caps of mushrooms, burning like torches. Flaming

guar screaming and sprinting to nowhere. The air was too hot to breath, the ash poisoned your lungs. Even when I fled to Solstheim, there was no escape. There was no sleeping. The night sky was bright orange for months."

"Khajiit does not think it wise to let your suffering define you."

"Says the one who's certainly going to kill and then die for his suffering. I've heard every platitude in the book, Kharjo." Nadene urged her mount forward. She avoided looking at him. "Every tired metaphor and comforting phrase there is. They're worth less than nothing. You handle your grief your way, and I'll handle mine however I can."

"Of course." Kharjo was glad Alma required little direction to follow her mate, for he suddenly felt very disinterested in following the mer in front of them. "Khajiit should have known better than to try to comfort the wise and broken Nerevarine. She is far more practiced in her bitterness than he could ever hope to be."

"Well." He caught a glimpse of Nadene's face in the moonlight. Her expression was measuredly still, her lips pressed tightly together. "Now you know."

They continued down the faded road, and the hours passed in muffled gloom. Kharjo studied the shore as best he could, but saw little that caught his eye. The western boundary of Solstheim seemed a monolithic stretch of wasteland. Only the occasional mudcrab or patch of boulders broke the landscape's monotony. Nadene drew Ur as close as she could to the ocean, slightly ahead of Kharjo and his mount. He heard her casting her sight spell again and again, and wondered how long they could carry on before her magicka reserves were depleted.

It was becoming clear to Kharjo that they would not be transporting to Vvardenfell anytime soon. *We have nearly exhausted our strength searching for the Knight-Paladin, for better or worse.* What was less clear was if the Nerevarine was going to accept this state of affairs. Kharjo was certain there was nothing he could do to stop Nadene, if she insisted on immediately leaving for Vvardenfell at the end of this long road. *It may be that Lord Fyr can speak some sense into her.*

"Wait." Ur stopped so quickly that Alma nearly collided with his tail. Nadene rubbed her eyes and squinted at the beach ahead. "Hold on just a minute."

"What is it you see?"

Nadene slid off her mount and jogged to the waterline, casting a spell as she went. Kharjo barely climbed off Alma in time to see the Nerevarine run across the water away from them. There was a potion bottle in her hand.

"Stop!" Kharjo sprinted, the wet ash squishing beneath his boots. He arrived too late to do anything but watch Nadene vanish into the mists. Small waves pushed and pulled at his ankles.

These immortal mer. They go too far. He returned to the guar, nervously waiting a safe distance from the surf. Kharjo secured them to a nearby corkbulb and sat down in the ash to watch the waters. He grabbed a bag of jerky from Ur's satchel and had a remarkably lonely meal.

"Maybe two elves will come back, and we can move on," Kharjo said to Alma. "Or maybe none will return, and Khajiit's life will be made refreshingly simple. No more strange elves who hate and love each other. No more poorly lit parties or bizarre wizard clones. Just going to Vvardenfell to kill a witch. Or to be killed by a witch. Either way, I can be done with this nonsense."

The guar snuffled at his shoulder. Kharjo sighed and looked towards the horizon.

Gelebor woke up with tall grass tickling the soles of his feet. He wore only a pair of cloth trousers, and there was loose dirt beneath his back. The air was fresh and smelled of salt, with no trace of ash. *This isn't Solstheim.* He opened his eyes a sliver, and saw palm trees and golden sand. *But nor is it Vvardenfell.*

"The lost child awakens." A Dunmer woman in flowing blue robes stood over him. It took Gelebor a moment to recognize her. "Fear not. You are in a place of safety."

"You're..." Gelebor cleared his throat, and stumbled to his feet. "You're the woman from my dreams."

"Those were not mere dreams. They were visions." She grabbed his arm and pulled him towards a worn dirt path. "Your physical form remains in mortal peril. But I have brought your mind to the west, to a place forgotten by time. Search your memories, betrayed one. This is not your first time on this island."

"You can't mean..." Gelebor looked at the flora and fauna around them in a new light. The tropical atmosphere, the heat and the wind...it all correlated to his memories of those impossible survivors. "The Snow Elves I saw? The family on the beach?"

"These beings name themselves Falmer." They'd come to a clearing in the forest. Small thatch huts were dotted around, some of them in disrepair. Figures of ivory and alabaster moved between them, mer of all ages and size. "When they first landed, they numbered in the hundreds. This day they are dozens. Soon, they will be gone."

Gelebor held a hand to his mouth, unable to form words. He could not tear his eyes from the elves. He watched a Falmer boy throw a ball to his brother. An old mer with long white hair sat watching them, a content expression on his face. The mer he'd seen in one of his first dreams, who'd lived on the beach with her lover and son, passed by the treeline carrying a heavy basket.

"Can I speak to them?"

"That is beyond possibility."

"Okay." Gelebor bit his lip. "What's going to happen here?"

"An exploratory vessel of the Mede Empire will land on the eastern shore." The Dunmer surveyed the village blankly. "The Falmer will draw first blood. They have been isolated here for centuries, and do not speak the common language of this era. The soldiers will kill all the fighting mer, but not before their vessel is destroyed. They will retaliate harshly, and bring about the true and final extinction of Auriel's favored race."

"That's horrible." Gelebor turned away from her. "I'm not sure I believe you. Everything is happening so quickly. Perhaps this is all an illusion, put into my head by a cultist of Namira."

"All reality is an illusion," the Dunmer said impassively. "But hope is not lost for the Falmer gathered here. I can tell you the location of this island. If you move with purpose, you may arrive in time stay the hand of destiny."

A wave of dizziness overcame Gelebor. He braced himself against a dune tree. The bark beneath his fingers was scratchy and rough, as real as anything he'd ever felt.

"Tell me. Where are they?"

"First, you must uphold your end of the bargain. Travel with the Nerevarine to Vvardenfell. Wipe

clean the stain of Namira from those battered wastes."

"What?" Gelebor straightened, and took a closer look at the graceful mer. "Wait. You know about the cultists?"

"I see all that happens in the land of my cursed children." The Dunmer raised her chin high. "I am the Queen of Dawn and Dusk, and all who dare to trespass in my domain will meet the same fate as Voryn Dagoth and his followers. Scourge the cult of Namira to the last, Knight-Paladin. Leave none alive to praise her name. Do this, and save the Falmer."

"I'm not a Knight-Paladin any longer. But I'm not an assassin, either. And Nadene has told me what she thinks of you."

"The Nerevarine has her own path to follow. You have your orders."

Gelebor took a deep breath. "Nadene and I are going to save her granddaughter. If these followers of darkness get in the way of that, I won't hesitate to cut them down. And if Kharjo asks me to assist him in fighting their leader, I'll gladly stand beside him. What I won't fall to is killing dozens of beings for the sake of it. If they throw down their weapons, we will take them as prisoners. I'm not some wild beast."

"No matter." Azura turned to look at the village, still bustling under the midday sun. "You will do my bidding, when the time comes. Just as Nadene Othryn did, and Indoril Nerevar before her."

The world around them melted away, like a painting left in the rain. The trees, the sands, and the Falmer village disappeared, and Azura stood alone in the empty darkness. She turned to look at him, and Gelebor shivered.

"Do not fear, Gelebor. I am not the father who has forsaken you. We will speak again."

His head knocked against wood. Gelebor groaned, and opened his eyes once more. The sky above was as gray as blasted stone, and choked with ash. *Seems about right.* He was in a sailboat, piloted by a robed Altmer he wasn't pleased to see again.

"You're awake." Sanyon grinned. "Funny, how we keep meeting like this. It's been terribly dull, just talking to myself. I'd conjure an atronach but for the weight. Truly a shame that you and your friend murdered the only mer in Nirn that ever enjoyed my company."

"She was going to...taste me."

"Hmm. Nimphaneth, ever the impatient mer. Don't fret. I won't be taking any appetizer bites during our little journey. I know my place," Sanyon said, and turned to adjust the fluttering sail.

"Where are you taking me?" Gelebor found his limbs particularly uncooperative. He couldn't even lift himself out of the bottom of the vessel to see over the sides.

"I've told you. Multiple times. This isn't a situation where playing dumb is going to get you anywhere, my boy. And no, you can't move. My potions have made sure of that." Sanyon giggled. "I still have the bruises on my neck from when you tried to strangle me in that clearing. Maybe I'll ask Eola if I can eat your hands, when the promised hour arrives. Wouldn't that be ironic?"

"No." A strange sense of calm came over Gelebor. *There's nothing I can do, for now. I can't even drown myself.* He wasn't sure if this was catharsis, or a side effect of Sanyon's potions. "It'd just be an amusing coincidence. Irony suggests a meaning contrary to actual fact."

"Oh. How do you know that?"

"I had a lot of time to read books that wiser mer left behind." Gelebor wished he could stretch his aching legs.

"You're fortunate. I lived in a filthy cave for decades. Rotted my brains out of my skull, it seems like. And Eola didn't leave much reading material around."

"She's your leader?"

"Yes." Sanyon smiled. "The bearer of Namira's ring. She did good things for us in Markarth, I'll tell you that. Didn't let the coven go hungry. That's a lot of the reason we followed her out to this armpit of the world. Well, Nim and I, anyway. The others could be wrangled by anyone with a Breton sausage and a fishing rod."

"I still don't understand what you want from me." He watched the moons move past the ash clouds. "I'll give you some of my blood, if that will put a stop to this. Or even a hand."

"As far as I understand matters," Sanyon replied, "We're going to need every scrap of your precious body. Eola claims that when we eat of your flesh, followers of Namira will rise up all over Tamriel and realize their true hunger. The streets will run red, civilizations will crumble, et cetera, et cetera."

"That's absolute madness." Gelebor managed to swallow. His tongue was a heavy weight in his mouth. "I'd hardly even heard of your goddess before you attacked me in the woods. You must have read your prophecy incorrectly."

Sanyon shrugged slightly. "Our beloved leader seems confident in her visions. Between you and me, I don't foresee much of a future for our cult after the promised feast. It's easy to grab someone for our dinners when Namira features most prominently only in frightening stories children tell to one another. Outside of the Aedric orders, Vigilants and the like, your common resident of Tamriel doesn't pay much mind to the Lady of Decay. If your cousin goes missing one night, well, perhaps he ran away to join the Bard's College. Maybe he was carried off by enchanted skeevers. People will blame *vampires* before cannibals, for void's sake. As soon as the faithful rise to consume their friends and family, all of that ends. It will be a war. And I am no warrior, my sweet. I am a lover."

"Then why continue down this path?" This was Gelebor's last chance. He wasn't sure how close they were to Vvardenfell, if they had gone too far for Nadene to follow. "You seem to be a reasonable mer, culinary peculiarities aside. Just tell Eola that I died fighting reavers, and my friends provided me with a funeral in the local fashion. They'll be nothing to present at your meal but ashes. This insanity can come to an end."

"Yes. You would like that, wouldn't you?" Sanyon turned his head, the moonlight shining off his too-wide eyes, and Gelebor knew there was no hope. "I just let you go, and you return to that Dunmeri wench, and you both make little off-white babies together. Maybe you let your Khajiit sleep at the end of the bed. And the three of you sit around and laugh about the time you killed silly old Sanyon's friend, and then he let you get away with it."

"You don't have to do this."

"Shut up," Sanyon ordered coldly. "There's some rough surf ahead. I'm going to put us in this cove until it clears. If *you* decide to get clever, I'll show you how creative *I* can get with a small knife in a tight place. There are parts I can take from you that Eola won't notice are missing. Not until the third course, anyway."

He tightened the sails against the mast, and their vessel slowly drifted west. Small waves rocked against the side of the boat. The sky above was clear, for once. Gelebor looked at the stars, given little other option, and wondered if Azura was watching events transpire. *Would she have offered that deal, without the assurance that I'd live to fulfill my promise to her?* She had said, before dissolving the illusion, that they would speak again. *Perhaps the Daedric Prince of egoism is just a wishful thinker.*

They passed under a long outcropping of rock, and the stars vanished from view. The boat stilled. Sanyon stood with one hand on the mast, squinting in the direction of the sea. *I think we're still off the shore of Solstheim. That's something, at least.* Judging from Nadene's descriptions, he didn't think he'd be able to breathe the air on Vvardenfell near as well.

A wet mass of fur exploded from the surface of the water in front of them, shuddering and gasping. Sanyon raised his hand towards the creature, but Gelebor lashed out with his foot and the fireball flew wild into the night sky.

"Bastard!" Sanyon kicked him, and his head skipped off the hull like a flat stone off a calm river. Gelebor's vision faltered. Moisture dripped from his ears. When he managed to focus his eyes again, he saw the fur creature had vanished back underwater.

"That was your Khajiit, wasn't it?" Sanyon spun wildly, both of his hands raised now. There was a mania in his eyes that disquieted Gelebor. "Talk. Tell him to come out and give up, and I'll let him walk away from this. It's only you I want."

"No." It took great effort to form the word, as if he were a child again.

"You don't want your friend to live?"

"Don't believe he'd listen." There was a beating in Gelebor's skull, like the drumbeat of a Riekling shaman. "You ate his wife."

"That doesn't really narrow it down." Sanyon grimaced. "No matter. You had your chance. I'm guessing your Dunmer witch knew how to brew waterbreathing potions. But I'm not letting that Khajiit sneak up on us again. Oh, no. I think I'm in the mood for some soup."

He pointed his open palms at the water, and twin streams of flame shot forth. The surface exploded with steam, and a wave of heat washed over Gelebor.

The tip of a sword split through the bottom of the hull and into Sanyon's foot. Sanyon screamed and blindly redirected his flames, and the boat was engulfed in fire. Gelebor didn't have time to panic before Kharjo came up over the side and the boat flipped upside down. His last sight was a distant figure sprinting towards them on the surface of the moonlit sea. Then his mouth filled with salt water.

Gelebor managed one feeble kick, but he'd fallen in from a bad angle and only pushed himself deeper under. His unresponsive limbs were anchors, and he sunk to the sea floor. The water was clouded with ash: Gelebor could see nothing, hear nothing, and feel nothing but the burning of his lungs. There had been no time to take a breath before the boat tipped. His mind screamed *KICK, KICK, KICK*, but he was as limp as a corpse. Gelebor's chest was fire. *Let it end, please, Auriel, Azura, anyone, make it stop it hurts so much the cold the ash in my lungs so hot and burning Vyrthur please make it stop brother-*

He rushed to the surface in a cloud of bubbles, a pair of strong hands gripping his chestplate. Kharjo threw him on the rocks none too gently. Past the upturned boat, Nadene and Sanyon stood

on the water and fired spells at each other indiscriminately. A fireball burst against the ground next to Gelebor, showering him in molten shards. He gasped desperately for air.

A frost atronach materialized on the shore in a blast of purple light. Kharjo cursed and ran at it with his sword. Gelebor heard more explosions and the sounds of battle, the chipping of ice and the swinging of blades. He hadn't the strength to lift his head, but some part of him registered that Sanyon was getting closer despite Nadene's barrage of magic. But the limping footsteps turned away. Gelebor heard a gasp, and a falling sword.

"Stop!" Sanyon screamed. "I'll jab this knife right into his gullet!"

"Okay!" Gelebor found the willpower to look up. Nadene stood on the water, cloaked by the shadow of the rocky outcropping. Her hands were in the air. "Please. Don't hurt him."

"Throw your bow towards me. And any other weapons you have." Sanyon held Kharjo's head at a sharp angle, and the edge of the dagger was steady against his neck.

Nadene's glass bow clattered against the stones. Her hunting knife followed, and a quiver of gleaming arrows. The sight of each sent waves of dread through Gelebor. He felt quite dizzy, all of a sudden.

"Kill us," Kharjo hissed. "Nerevarine. You know what must be done."

"Shh. The wench will do as I say." Sanyon sliced a clump of fur off Kharjo's neck. "Listen closely, Dunmer. I want you to teleport away. I'm sure wherever you placed your mark, it's too far from here to make any difference. Leave my sight, *immediately*, or both of your friends will bloody these waters tonight."

"I'm *not* leaving. Release the Khajiit, and I'll consider letting you live."

Sanyon snorted. "What kind of negotiation do you call that?"

"Mercy. This is your last chance."

"Fool." Sanyon's dagger slid across Kharjo's throat just as Nadene's spell impacted against his chest. The blade rasped against hardened skin. Nadene soared across the water, faster than any living thing Gelebor had seen. Her feet were in the air. She slammed into Sanyon a second after Kharjo hit the ground.

They wrestled on the surface of the water, punching and tearing at each other like starving nix hounds tossed in a pit. But the tides turned quickly. Nadene got Sanyon under her, grabbed his long blond hair, and slammed his face into the water again and again. Teeth and blood flew from Sanyon's face and into the sea, split from the spell of their master. Sanyon squealed and whimpered in agony, for a long minute, and then went quiet. His legs shuddered and stretched. Kharjo stood at the shore with his sword, watching quietly. Nadene didn't stop until the hairs clenched in her fist ripped away by the root and Sanyon was beyond hope and recognition. His body rested on the surface, and blood drained from it like a teabag's essence and stained the waters beneath.

"Nadene," Gelebor said weakly. She turned her head, blinking. Blood trickled from her nose and mouth. Bruises were already forming on the sides of her face. He'd never seen anything so beautiful. "Glad you're here. Going to rest now."

"Hold on." Nadene crawled towards him clumsily, over water and rock, until they were face to face on the shore. She cradled his head and felt around with her hands, stopping for a moment at his bloodied ears. *Such pleasant, warm hands.* Nadene slapped his cheeks gently.

"Ow."

"Don't go to sleep, love. I'm not sure if you'll wake up. Here, hold still."

An aura of warmth shimmered around his head, and some of the cuts on his face sealed up.

"Thank you. I feel less...clouded, now." Gelebor let his muscles relax, comfortable in her lap.

"You don't know how afraid I was." Nadene looked down at him, smiling sadly. "This is what I was so scared of, before. You've made me weak, Gelebor."

"I'm sorry."

"No." She cradled his head and kissed him softly. "I'd rather it this way."

"You came for me. You can't know what that means, after so many years of solitude."

Nadene's face fell. "I wasn't the only one. Kharjo, please come here."

Kharjo staggered towards them, no doubt suffering some pains of his own. He knelt down beside Gelebor's head.

"What's wrong?" Gelebor frowned. "Did something happen?"

"I was...unkind, to say the least." She covered her face with her hands. "Kharjo, I'm sorry. I was awful to you. You were just trying to help me, and I attacked. I'd say I'm not used to having friends, to having people care about me, but those aren't excuses. I'll understand if you want to stop traveling with me. We'll kill this priestess for you, have no doubt about that."

"Hush," Kharjo said, taking her hands gently in his. "This Khajiit knows too well the dread you were carrying in your heart. He knows it was not his friend Nadene that spoke such horrible words to him."

"But it *was* me. Please, tell me how to make it right."

"I've forgiven you. But if you insist, then do what I asked of you before. Do not linger on your troubles, or they will haunt your every waking moment. Remember the pleasant times. Your fear and anger can make you strong, but this power is as fleeting as the moons."

"Okay. I'll try my best." Nadene looked from Kharjo to Gelebor. "Let's get out of here. The guards will find their own way back to Raven Rock. I've been on this island long enough."

The trio stood together on the platform, their hands clasped. Everything they would need was secured in their packs; Gelebor had double checked every potion bottle and package of foodstuff. His armor was cleaned and gleaming white in Tel Mithryn's magelight. Nadene wore her glass armor, and Lord Fyr had provided a light elven set for Kharjo.

"You sure you can't come with us?" Nadene asked.

"Positively certain." Divayth's eyes flickered to the doorway. They'd already bid farewell to Athtera and the infants. "I can't take the risk, my child. Not this time."

"I think I understand. If the locals begin to eat each other, you'll know we failed." She cocked her head. "What will you do, if the worst comes to pass? I'm sure you've already planned for it."

Divayth smiled. "Of course. I'll take my family into a pocket realm to wait out the bad weather. I

don't expect an anarchist cannibal society will be capable of ruling Tamriel for longer than a few centuries. They'll eventually be forced to eat each other, I expect. Or perhaps the Akaviri will make an appearance to purge the poor fools."

"Well, good luck."

"The same to you, Hortator. Keep Gelebor safe. He is too precious a specimen to lose. And Kharjo, try to ensure these two don't do anything too foolish. Self-sacrifice for the sake of Morrowind, sacrifice for the sake of each other, so on and so forth. None of that, please."

"Khajiit is prepared to knock heads together."

"Splendid." Divayth stepped forward, the glowing heart stone in his hands. "This is a one way journey. You will have to find another way back to Solstheim or the mainland. Nadene, any marks you've placed will be out of reach. Are you prepared?"

Nadene muttered, "Just get it over with."

The heart shattered in Divayth Fyr's hands, and then they were gone.

A Step Forward Into Terror

"You no longer bear the burden of prophecy. You have achieved your destiny. You are free." - Azura

In the times before Saint Jiub the Eradicator conducted his storied culling, cliff races would have filled the skies of the Sheogorad region in Vvardenfell's far northern reaches. Instead, a Falmer materialized out of thin air and began to fall. The ash storm blinded Gelebor so quickly he didn't have time to judge his surroundings before gravity took hold. The tainted air tore at his cloak and brought tears to his eyes, and the sharper particles of ash sent pinpricks of pain across his exposed skin. The ground rushed towards him, a featureless gray expanse.

Gelebor landed in a mound of ash that exploded on impact, sending up clouds of dust. The wind was knocked out of him. He curled up into a ball and put his arms over his face, and took several deep breaths. *Vvardenfell, at last.* If he followed Azura's command, he would take many lives on this island. If he refused her, he would be damning to extinction the last enclave of Snow Elves on Tamriel. Gelebor pushed his thoughts away and focused on the sound of the winds. It troubled him, to have a new god to answer to so soon after leaving Auriel. He'd have liked to make independence a habit.

Something told Gelebor that waiting for the storm to abate might be a waste of time. He staggered to his feet against the waves of billowing ash. Every step was like walking through a dune. If Nadene and Kharjo weren't nearby, Gelebor wasn't sure how he would ever find them. He cupped his hands over his eyes and peered up and down the shoreline, but there were no discernable landmarks in any direction. Just more ash, and the sea, and distant dark shapes which Gelebor supposed to be hills. *Hills that lead to slopes, slopes that lead to cliffs, and cliffs that lead to Red Mountain.* It gave him hope to know he now shared an island with Nadene's chosen granddaughter. *I send you my heart, Habisunilu. Gather your strength. It won't be long now.*

He had been walking for a short while, making little progress, when movement caught his eye. A small crab writhed on the beach just ahead. *Pleasing to see life returning here, after all this time. Seems he's trapped.* Gelebor knelt down to brush the ash away from the creature, and revealed a dusty six-point star at the end of one of its pincers. *Hmm. Bizarre.* He looked closer at the crab, and gasped. *No. No!*

He frantically dug at the ash around the finger, and Nadene's shuddering hand was revealed in measures far too small for Gelebor's liking. He grabbed her and pulled with all his strength. Her grip was frighteningly weak. The points of Moon-and-Star cut into his palm like tiny daggers, but Gelebor pulled until blood ran down his wrist and a slender gray body came up from the ash and landed on top of him. He was breathing hard, but there was no time for rest.

"Nadene!" He shook her shoulders, and ash fell in clumps from her short hair. Nadene groaned, and Gelebor thought it the most delightful sound on Nirn. She turned over on her hands and knees and coughed violently, puffs of gray coming off her with every movement. He patted her back in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. "Are you alright?"

"No." Nadene was still. She'd stopped coughing, but her head was still bent to the ground. "I'm on fucking Vvardenfell. Do you think the ocean's poison?"

"I'd recommend a water flask, actually."

"No. I need to get this mess off me. I feel like a b'veking ashspawn."

Gelebor stood close behind Nadene as she stumbled into the waters of the Inner Sea and washed the ash away. She dipped her head underwater, and Gelebor's heart froze. His mind filled with images of mad slaughterfish and underwater sinkholes and all other manner of unlikely dangers. *Is this what it feels like, to love someone?* For so long, Gelebor had only had to worry about himself. Now there was this whole other soul taking up space in his head, and he was definitely going to need some time to get used to that.

"Here you are." He handed her a flask. She shook out her hair, took a short drink, and sloshed water around in her mouth before spitting it into the sea. "That was unpleasant."

"One way to put it." Her face softened. "Did you take your potion yet?"

"Oh! No, I forgot." Gelebor reached into his pack and withdrew a amethyst-hued bottle. He drank the potion, wrinkling his nose at the bitter taste.

"You have to remember," Nadene chided. "*Dunmer* can barely survive in this kind of place, and we were born for it. I don't want you surviving a Namira cult just to die of ashlung."

"Yes, miss Othryn." He bowed his head and stowed the empty bottle. *Reassuring to know she's thinking about the future.* "You're certain you're okay?"

She grabbed her cloak from her pack and pulled it over her armor, and Gelebor followed suit. He'd put his hood up before Nadene finally responded. "If I hadn't had my mouth closed when we teleported, I'd be dead now. Maybe that's a sign. Let's stop talking and start moving. Kharjo must be around here somewhere."

He nodded, but Nadene had already turned away. She started walking down the shore, her shoulders slumped. The winds had ceased their merciless assault, at least for the present moment. Gelebor bit the inside of his cheek. *I don't know how to help her.* He tried to imagine what it would be like, to return to the Vale and find it in such a state. But even among the living Falmer he'd known, Gelebor had been no great figure of importance. The Dunmer of Vvardenfell had loved their Nerevarine. She'd watched them burn away, helpless to save more than a few.

"I thought..." Nadene said, after they'd been walking for a while. "Nevermind."

"Please. What's the matter?"

"I don't know." She raised her head and looked around. Now that the storm had cleared, they could see much farther inland. *Whether there's anything worth looking at is a different question.* Great mounds of ash dotted the landscape, intermittently interrupted by sharp rocks jutting out from the blasted surface and the occasional stream of bubbling lava. No living creature made a sound, nor did any leaves rustle or branches bend. There was only Red Mountain, filling the world to the south and obscuring the morning sun. Red Mountain and its children: the cliffs and hills and boulders and the horrible scars on the island that opened into sheer blackness. Nothing that would ever love or hate; nothing that could ever be loved or hated. "I was ready for it to be the same. You know? I was ready to lose my mind."

"I don't follow."

"I was expecting some sort of dramatic flashback to hit me. A rush of horrible memories, from all the horrible things that happened to me here. But instead..."

"Instead what?"

Nadene sighed. "I've never been here before. This isn't my Vvardenfell. The Red Year changed

everything. The air, the ground beneath our feet, the plants and animals. Only thing that stuck around was the damn ash."

"I see." They climbed over a particularly steep rise. "Does that make returning here more difficult or less?"

"I'm still figuring that part out myself." She grabbed Gelebor's hand and brought them to a halt. Nadene smiled weakly at him. There was a glossiness to her eyes, and no trace of the emotional shields he'd once associated so strongly with her. "I wanted to say...I'm really happy you're here with me. Thank you."

"No thanks are necessary." He stroked her hand softly. "If I wandered Nirn for another thousand years, I'd never find a place I more belong."

"I know. We both wasted so many years. And who knows how many we have left? Gelebor, I-"

A figure in chitin armor ran up the hill with a spear in his hand, yelling in Dunmeris. Nadene watched him without moving, evidently dumbstruck, but Gelebor took his mace off his belt and held it at the ready. Their attacker seemed adept at moving in the ash; his feet didn't linger long enough on the surface to sink underneath.

Before the figure reached weapons range, Nadene called out to him in Dunmeris. The figure stopped as if stunned, but didn't lower his spear. He responded, and Nadene spoke again. Gelebor recognized one or two of the words, but not enough to make sense of the conversation. To his surprise, Nadene began grinning at their strange attacker.

"He's an Ashlander!"

"An Ashlander?" Gelebor raised his brow. "I believe you told me your grandchild was the last of them."

"I...I thought she was." Nadene's grin widened. "He says he's Urshilaku."

"I do hope it's not contagious."

She snorted. The Ashlander finally pointed his spear away, but Gelebor sensed he was still watching them closely. "No. They're the tribe that helped me become the Nerevarine. I just can't believe they've survived this long."

The Ashlander looked up sharply at her words. He moved slowly, reaching up with cloth-wrapped hands to remove his chitin helmet. The Dunmer's face was like netch leather, roughly textured, and his mouth seemed to be set in a permanent grimace.

He spoke in a gravelly voice, "Nerevarine?"

"Yes. Stay back, Gelebor. I want to show him." Nadene stepped closer to the Dunmer, and raised her left hand. Moon-and-Star twinkled even in the dim sunlight, on one of her fingers not protected by armor. The Dunmer leaned forward and studied the ornament. "Maybe being Nerevar reborn will actually get me out of trouble, for once."

"Nerevarine," The Dunmer said again. He pointed to Nadene and raised his brow.

"Yup." Nadene waved her hand around. "Nerevarine. Hortator. Moon-and-Star. For all the good it's done me."

"F'lah," he snarled, and thrust his spear at her chest. Nadene flew backward, ribbons of her cloak filling the air, and the Dunmer raised his weapon again.

Gelebor swung his mace and reduced the wooden shaft to splinters. With his other hand, he reached out and grabbed the Dunmer's throat. Lean muscle squirmed and flexed under his fingers. The Dunmer gasped and scratched at his throat, searching for the gaps in Gelebor's gauntlet. *No time for this.* He threw the Dunmer against the ground and turned to look for Nadene.

"I'm...okay," she said, sitting up in the rocks. Her cloak was in tatters, but the glass chestplate beneath sported only a large scratch. She took distressingly long breaths between her words. "I don't think...he knew...I was wearing armor."

"Too close, Nadene." Gelebor was almost certain he could hear his heartbeat. "Too damn close. You *have* to be more careful. Like you said, you've never been here before. If this mer was truly an Ashlander, than perhaps they do not view you as fondly as they once did."

"You're right. It was stupid of me to think I might have friends on this island." She stood on shaky legs and brushed the ash from what remained of her cloak. There was a defeated note in her voice he didn't much care for. "Looks like you killed this fetcher, at least."

"What?" Gelebor glanced at the fallen Ashlander. "No. I didn't throw him that hard."

She brushed past him and knelt a cautious distance from the crumpled Dunmer.

"He's dead," She reported after a minute. "Or else giving a masterful audition for his Horror of Castle Xyr role. You're stronger than you know, Gelebor."

"Oh. Well, I suppose so."

"Don't lose any sleep over it." Nadene held up a wet satchel she'd taken from the Ashlander's belt. She wrinkled her nose. "There are no Velothi traditions about carrying around sacks of raw mer flesh. This was definitely one of Namira's faithful. Probably why he didn't attack you first. Wouldn't want to damage the goods."

Gelebor looked at his hands. He couldn't remember a time he'd taken a life without meaning to do so. Killing Slitter in that Solstheim warehouse did not weigh heavily on his conscience; he'd been defending Nadene, and no one on Nirn was mourning that mercenary. This Ashlander had been corrupted by a Daedric Prince. *I wonder if he had a family. I don't even know what he was called.* If this was what Azura wanted from him, Gelebor wasn't sure he could provide.

"Did he say his name? When you spoke."

Nadene glanced up from her rummaging. "Nope. We didn't really get to the 'comparing birthsigns' stage of conversation before his spear entered the picture. I really hope he didn't find Kharjo before us. His armor's not as tough as mine. And I have a bad feeling that if he met an Ashlander, he'd probably try out the only word of Velothi he knows."

Gelebor rubbed the back of his neck and looked down at the shattered spear in a new light, disturbed by Nadene's implication.

"His name was Sarobar," A woman's voice called from atop the hill. "And his heart was black and rotten. You did well, outlander."

His mace was back up in a second, and Nadene drew her bow and nocked a polished arrow. A Dunmer woman wrapped in worn robes watched them without reacting. She carried no weapon,

and her hands rested by her sides.

"Good. You came prepared. This land has been plunged into bitter war, and your killing of this traitor has marked you as servants of the righteous. Welcome, Moon-and-Star. I deliver you the heart of Resdayn to be cleansed of the craven and evil. Vvardenfell is yours again."

"It was never mine." Nadene glanced away, evidently unimpressed. "Who in Oblivion are you, to promise me an island?"

"I am Sakani of the honorable and wise Urshilaku. We are devoted servants of the Queen of Dusk and Dawn, your watchful patroness and protector."

"Azura. Wonderful."

If Sakani noticed the scorn in Nadene's voice, she didn't show a reaction. Gelebor thought of his own encounter with the Daedric Prince, just hours ago. He'd been too distracted in the aftermath of their altercation with Sanyon to even think of telling Nadene, and now they were on Vvardenfell. It seemed like a poor time to add to her worries, with Habi in mortal peril. *Especially when things are going so well between us.*

"So I suppose some of you aren't as devoted as the others? This fetcher was Urshilaku, too." Nadene nudged the dead Ashlander's corpse with her foot. "Eating Dunmer with Namira must seem a fairly attractive prospect when your diet consists of ash yams and dried root soup."

Sakani hissed. "Please do not speak that name, bold Nerevarine. The lady of the void grows in strength every time she is called in Azura's domain, and our mother's power diminishes the same amount."

"That manipulative bitch isn't my mother. And you haven't answered my question."

"Yes. You suppose rightly. Many of the weaker Velothi have been seduced to the ranks of the Enemy. Mer of poor constitution and despicable character. They desecrate the honored dead under Red Mountain and spit in the face of Azura. One of our gulakhans is among them."

Nadene finally lowered her weapon, and Gelebor followed her example. "And what of your ashkhan?"

"The treacherous gulakhan was his son." Sakani came slowly down the hill, and with her feet cloaked by her robe she appeared almost to float on the ash. "Zanilath's heart was turning against the Urshilaku. Against Azura. So I cut it out, before he could turn his dark thoughts into wicked deeds."

"The mer of your tribe that I knew were lorekeepers. Mystics. The wise women certainly weren't cutting their way through the tribal leadership."

"Our wisest perished in the year of reckoning." Sakani looked towards Red Mountain. "Much of our knowledge died with them. The gravest blow to Veloth's people in an age."

"Also, you know, the thousands of elves that burned to death."

Gelebor interjected, "Were all of your books burned away, as well?"

"The n'wah mistakes us for temple scribes." Sakani didn't turn to look at Gelebor. "Perhaps we should return to the village, now. There we can talk without ignorant ears listening in."

"First of all, fuck Azura." Nadene crossed her arms. "Secondly, I don't plan on going anywhere on this cursed island without Gelebor at my side. Otherwise I'll probably end up falling in the nearest lava pit just to preserve my sanity. Tell me, fetcher. Why should I go anywhere with you? And if you use the words 'prophecy' or 'chosen one', you're going to go meet your ancestors a lot sooner than you planned."

"I know of no prophecy. Azura has spoken to me, but her words were as clear as the ash is hot. The time of mysteries has passed. We have come to an era of truth and bloodshed, Moon-and-Star."

"Every era is an era of bloodshed. And I've never left a conversation with a Daedric Prince feeling better about the world. Tell Azura I'm done doing her dirty work."

Sakani's face was impassive. "I ask nothing of you but to accompany me to the village. Your Khajiit has already joined us."

"Kharjo?" Gelebor couldn't help but smile.

"I don't know his name. All allies of the Nerevarine are welcomed by the Urshilaku. No matter their race...or their faith." Sakani glared.

"Pardon me?"

"As if your pale skin was not enough to mark you as a follower of the Divines," She waved a hand at his torso. "You parade around in ceremonial armor of Auri-El in this land of twilight."

"I hold faith with Auriel no longer." He found himself surprisingly upset. "Not that it's any concern of yours."

Sakani just shook her head. "My lady. We are besieged on all sides by the ignorant and the blind. What am I to do?"

Nadene rolled her eyes and pulled on Gelebor's arm. They walked several steps away, turned their backs, and spoke in hushed voices.

"Listen." Nadene jacked her thumb towards the muttering Ashlander. "I'm about ready to leave this bitch for the ash hoppers. I've been to Red Mountain before. We don't need a guide, and I didn't come here to be some Ashlander hero again. I came here as Habi's kin, to save her, and as your...whatever, to stop these cultist n'wahs from trying to eat you. Let's just get on with it and go cut this Eola woman's head off. We could all be drinking in Raven Rock by tomorrow morning."

"I'm not sure matters are that simple anymore."

She groaned and put her hands over her face. "Why. Why can't it ever be easy?"

"You said yourself that the island has changed. Likely the paths you once knew have been covered with ash and rock." *Tell her about Azura, you halfwit.* "And it would be a disservice to Kharjo to go on without him, even if we know he's in safe hands. Perhaps we should entertain this Ashlander for a time. At the very least, we'll probably get a warm meal or two out of it."

"Hmm. Have to admit, I wasn't looking forward to our planned three-jerky a day diet. Fine. Just don't ask me to be nice to the one behind us. You do all the talking."

"As you wish, dear."

The heat in her eyes suggested anger, but Nadene was smiling when she pushed him back towards

Sakani. There was a promise in his expression that he wasn't sure what to do with, quite yet. Gelebor told Sakani they'd agreed to travel to the Urshilaku camp, and the three of them crested the hill and continued down the shore.

"Take these and keep them ready." Gelebor accepted a couple of pairs of weathered goggles and two soft face masks of hide. "Our village hugs the feet of the Mountain. The storms will worsen as we grow nearer."

"I see. The one earlier today did give us a little trouble." He passed Nadene her gear.

Sakani snorted. "That was no ash storm, outlander. That was the Black Isle clearing its throat."

They didn't speak after that. The Ashlands spread out before them: an arid wasteland of death and desolation, that did well to reflect Gelebor's mood. As they trudged through the ash, he found it remarkable how different Vvardenfell was from the southern regions of Solstheim. The latter island had been scorched by Red Mountain's fires, certainly, but these lands had been the epicenter of a devastation beyond imagining.

Gelebor knew well the stubbornness of rock and dirt. For entire eras he had witnessed the decay and renewal of thousands of living creatures. He remembered a priest taking him out to the forest to plant a pine tree, when he'd been just a child. And he remembered watching the old sentinel wither away and die thousands of years later. Always, the shape of the Vale had remained the same. Mountains were meant to be a constant, even for a mer living in eternity. *Maybe it's better, that Vvardenfell has changed so. I'm not sure if Nadene would be able to maintain her composure otherwise.*

The hills pressed them closer to the shore, until they were close enough that small waves splashed at their feet. Nadene had told him the waters of southern Vvardenfell were scalding to the touch, but the ocean here seemed much the same as it had been on Solstheim. He tried his best to keep his eyes on the sea. Lingered too long on Vvardenfell seemed to turn his mind to grim concerns. The secret in his heart burned like dwarven oil. He glanced at Nadene.

Her expression was still, her gaze set resolutely forward, but Gelebor knew her well enough now to recognize the pain she was in. The skin at the corners of her eyes was turned down, her lips closed tightly together. *It's not as if it matters. I don't expect the cult of Namira will be the type to lay down their arms and surrender. We'll have to kill them all, and Azura will fulfill her end of the promise. Nadene need not be troubled by any of this.* The reasoning seemed sound, but all Gelebor could think of was the feel of her lips against his, and the way she'd looked at him during Morvayn's dinner. *I was not made for this.*

"I love you," he blurted out, after they'd been walking for several hours.

Nadene gave him a strange smile. "I know. Why?"

The response stunned him. "Well, I-"

Sakani interrupted, "Silence, outlander. We approach the village. The home of Azura's most loyal warriors in the battle for Resdayn."

Twin spires of rock reached into the sky, and between them was the entrance to a valley. Gnarled trees sprouted from the craggy walls in every direction, making the vale almost a kind of forest. Gelebor was glad to leave the shore. Even in the oppressive heat of Vvardenfell, the waves had been cold on his feet.

"Airan's Teeth," Nadene said, looking up at the rock columns. "Makes sense that you lot would take up residence here. Even if you can't get into the cave."

"The Nerevarine is wise," Sakani crowed. She seemed to take the remark as an expression of interest. Gelebor shifted uncomfortably. *I don't like the way this mer looks at her.* "Azura led us to the Valley of the Wind when the sky filled with fire and poison, but the honor of entering the Cavern of the Incarnate remains yours alone. Perhaps you'd like to confer with our lady, when twilight falls upon us? The Urshilaku have kept the path clear for you."

"Nope." Nadene ran her thumb over Moon-and-Star, touching each starpoint in turn. "That two-faced f'lah and I have nothing to talk about."

Sakani just smiled mysteriously and led them between Airan's Teeth. The winds fell in strength when they entered the protection of the foyada. *If I were to seek refuge from an apocalypse, this certainly wouldn't be a poor choice.* Of course it couldn't compare to the Vale he'd left behind in Skyrim, but few places did. The windtorn walls of this valley were nearly bare, and so narrow in places that Gelebor had to walk behind Nadene and Sakani in order to fit. It didn't escape his attention the strategic worth of such an arrangement. *Little wonder they've been able to mount a resistance against the cultists. A handful of archers could hold this rift against a legion.*

They came upon signs of habitation: neat areas of ash set aside from the main path, where the roots of ash yams, trama, and other hardy vegetables poked out of the barren soil. A battered dwarven crossbow rested in the ash next to a few primitive farming implements. Gelebor raised his brow at it as they passed.

Sakani noticed the object of his attention and spat at the ground. "A weapon of the Enemy. This is the closest they have dared tread to our village. Azura's mighty warriors felled the traitor with many arrows. The hoppers have taken his body, but the tool of his treachery remains. To serve as an example for the others that will come to die for their false goddess."

"These fetchers have advanced dwarven technology?" Nadene bit her lip. "Then they must be held up in one of the inner citadels. Odrosal, or Vemynal, or maybe the Dagoth Ur facility. Damn it. I was hoping to avoid a siege."

They walked around a curve in the valley. "Do not fret, Nerevarine. All will become clear to you, in time. Look. We've arrived. Behold the Urshilaku, the last of Veloth's people!"

A handful of yurts filled this wider area of the foyada, and figures wearing chitin and bone walked between them and spoke to each other using words Gelebor did not know. In the center of the village a bonfire crackled merrily, and more of the makeshift farms were spread around beyond the yurts. Most of the Ashlanders wore goggles and facemasks similar to the ones Sakani had provided, and there were few who exposed enough skin for Gelebor to even identify them as Dunmer. Makeshift ladders and stairs covered the sides of the foyada, leading up to the tops of the valley. At first he assumed their arrival had been unexpected, and was surprised at the lack of security. Then three Ashlanders approached them from behind, wielding spears, and called out in harsh Velothi.

"To our hearth comes Nerevar Reborn!" Sakani cried out. The warriors stopped, and their wonder was evident even with their faces covered. The other villagers stopped what they were doing and looked towards the newcomers. "The star-blessed hand returns to guide our steps!"

"Hold on," Nadene said. "I didn't travel here for the Ashlanders. Don't tell them that."

"For two centuries we have maintained the vigil. The Urshilaku did not let the light of Azura

dwindle from this land. Now our loyalty is repaid. The child born to sire uncertain, who cast down the Sharmat from his Red Tower and crushed the Tribe Unmourned. Now our new adversaries will suffer the same fate!"

"No. That's not what's going to happen *at all*." Nadene clenched her fists. Gelebor put a hand on her shoulder. The Urshilaku watched reverently, some of them with their heads bowed.

"Nerevarine!" One warrior called out, and fell to his knees. "Ho Nerevarine!"

"Yes, my child. She is here to save us." Sakani raised her arms and smiled crookedly. "Three belied her, three betrayed her, and now the three are gone. But she remains, and we have been true! Nerevar will lead us through fire and war! To Red Mountain, to cast out the outlanders and spill their lifeblood in the ash! Hortator, savior! March Veloth's people to victory!"

Many of the Ashlanders cheered and raised their weapons in the air. Nadene trembled under his hand. He bent his head to whisper in her ear, but it was too late. She shook his grip off and went towards Sakani.

"She will deliver us from the hands of our enemies! Ho, Nerevarine!"

"*Shut the fuck up!*" Nadene punched Sakani in the face, sending the wise woman reeling. Several of the Urshilaku gasped, but none moved towards the pair. Nadene looked at them with wide, wild eyes, breathing heavily. She wrenched Moon-and-Star from her finger and threw it far. As it flew, the ornament glittered in the light of the falling sun.

"Nadene!" Gelebor said, and she looked towards him. She held his gaze for a moment, her bottom lip trembling, and then crumpled to the ground. He rushed forward, ignoring the stares of the Ashlanders, and gathered her in his arms. Nadene sobbed against his chestplate, nearly hyperventilating. He held her closer and walked to the yurts.

"Do you have a place for guests?" Gelebor asked politely.

A short figure clad in bonemold stood up from the bonfire and came to them. He tugged on Gelebor's cloak and led them to a yurt set apart from the rest.

"Thank you."

The short Ashlander tugged down his mask, and Gelebor was surprised to look into the face of a child.

"N'wah," The boy sneered, and pointed to the yurt. "Stay."

Gelebor ducked inside, eager to escape the eyes and insulting words of the Urshilaku.

"Hello, Knight-Paladin." Kharjo sat in the middle of the dwelling, his legs crossed. A cup of bitter-smelling tea was balanced on one knee.

"Kharjo. You don't know how happy I am to see you again." Gelebor sat down against one of the walls of the yurt, Nadene still in his lap. It felt good to stretch his legs out.

"Khajiit heard a commotion. Is everything alright?"

Gelebor hesitated. "Well. I don't think things have been alright for quite a while now, wouldn't you say? And I don't think they're going to get better for a little while yet."

"This may be true. We have made it this far, at least. This is an accomplishment. Of that, Khajiit has no doubt."

"I'll try to take comfort in that." Gelebor rested his head against Nadene's. Her breathing was calming down, thankfully.

A voice spoke from the corner of the yurt, where a wrinkled bedroll lay. "Your friend. Is she ill? I may be able to help."

"No. We're all just a tad overwhelmed, but thank you for offering."

The Dunmer sat up from his bedroll and regarded them curiously. He had long black hair and a short beard, but seemed to lack the wildness of a tribal. Besides that, his Cyrodiilic spoke of someone educated in the Empire. *But then again, so did Sakani's.*

"Are you the Urshilaku's healer?"

"No, my son. I am merely a guest of these people. In truth, I have overstayed my welcome, but fate has left me little other choice. I was gravely injured when the Ashlanders found me. I'm afraid it seems I'll never walk again."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Might I ask your name?"

"Ah, yes. I beg your pardon, but the last few days have not been kind to me. My manners seem to have gone the way of my legs. My name is Erandur. I'm a priest in the service of lady Mara."

"Truly?" Gelebor couldn't help but smile. "How in the heavens did you end up here? It must be quite the story."

"Khajiit was also surprised to learn this kindly mer's occupation." Kharjo's whiskers twitched. "He says he came from Balmora."

Gelebor's mind raced. "Balmora. Then we may have more than a few questions for you."

Erandur nodded. "And I will be happy to answer them. But perhaps you should let your friend sleep, for now, and get some rest yourself. I'm guessing the day has been long for the both of you."

"That's probably a good idea." Nadene looked at peace for the first time since they'd arrived, slumbering against his breastplate. "It's good to meet you, Erandur. I was afraid we'd be alone on this island."

"Fear not. Lady Mara watches over us all, my child."

Gelebor laid down, moving Nadene as gently as possible, and closed his eyes.

False Regeneration

Visions of fire and war danced through Eola's head and sent her mind ringing like a mighty dwarven bell. Secluded in her chamber, away from the other cultists, she had no reason to hide the agony Namira's visits wrung from her. Eola writhed on the floor, blood dripping from her ears, and smiled so hard her cheeks hurt. *The price of knowledge. What is an evening of pain, a pint of blood, against the death of the world? Nothing more than a drop of red in the ocean to come.*

Namira showed Eola hunched, misshapen figures staggering through caverns of scorching rock. *Your servants, dear lady, that will rise after the meal of prophecy.* She saw fields of fire, continents burning and cracking apart, and clouds of poison filling the sky. Every mortal that died in this depraved and ruined future would join Namira's legion in the Scuttling Void. Eola could hardly wait to go there herself, and she never longed more for Namira's embrace than when she was made to suffer the visions. *Without the prophecy, there would be no promised meal. I must endure. For the sake of what comes after.*

There was a knocking at her door. "Eola?"

"Enter." Eola rose to her hands and knees, breathing heavily. The ground was warm under her palms. *I have nothing to hide from this one.*

Lisbet obeyed. *As she always does. Sweet, loyal Lisbet.* The Nord woman smoothed the skirt of her robes and looked down at Eola with a worried expression.

"Another vision? So soon?" Lisbet went to the pitcher of water on the bedside table and poured a glass. "Things are happening fast, now. I suppose it makes sense. I just wish our lady would have a little more care for her ring-bearer."

"Fret not, love." Eola pulled herself to her feet and grabbed a cloth from her bed to wipe the sweat from her face. "I've been waiting years for these trials. My entire life has led up to these final days. I will not stumble at the precipice of salvation."

"Oh, I know. I just worry about you. With all the weight on your shoulders, you *must* remember to take care of yourself. Here, drink."

The water was cool and refreshing past her cracked lips. Finding channels of drinkable liquid in the maze of tunnels and caverns under Red Mountain had extracted a considerable toll on Eola's magical abilities. It didn't help that fate had dictated she be the only powerful mage among Namira's gathered ranks.

"Sanyon has gone beyond," Eola said wearily, setting down the cup. "Namira granted me a glimpse through the eyes of a nonbeliever. Our brother on Solstheim died trying to bring the prophecy to fruition. It was the Nerevarine that killed him."

Lisbet sat down slowly on the edge of the bed. "I can't believe it. First this greyskin wench took Nym, and now Sanyon as well? They were the best of us, Eola."

"They served Namira faithfully. Do not mourn them; we'll all be together again soon. And do not speak so easily of greyskins, now that it seems apparent that our goddess wishes these elves gathered in the caves around us to be the chief heralds of the day of prophecy."

"You're right. I'm stupid. I forget, sometimes, that Skyrim is behind us." Lisbet's chin fell. She rubbed the blanket of Eola's bed between her fingers.

Eola sidled up beside her lover, ignoring the ache in her legs, and nudged Lisbet. "Not just behind us, love. Before us. Close your eyes, and picture Markarth. Do you see it? Have you returned?"

"Ah...yes." Lisbet smiled slightly, her eyes shut. "I see the dwarven towers, high in the sky. I see Banning and his dogs, and the front gate to the city. I see...I see the guards."

"Imagine them away, my sweet. Or better yet, imagine me standing over them with a bloody dagger. Markarth will be ours, as it always should have been. The Forsworn will bend to Namira or perish alongside the Nords. And we will taste of the richest family in the land, and see if their blood truly runs with silver."

Lisbet giggled and hugged Eola. The priestess of Namira relaxed, letting herself go weak in the other woman's embrace. *Would that we could go to that day of triumph, in the not-so-distant future.* But there was still much pain left to endure, for the both of them.

There were footsteps outside. Eola recognized the soft-soled tread and smiled warmly. "Come in, brother."

Of all the Dark Elves that had become a part of Namira's coven following the fall of Balmora, Ayndil Betharys impressed her the most. Many of his brothers and sisters still stumbled around the caverns like befuddled bonewalkers, adapting slowly to their new positions in this cursed world Eola had created. They were prisoners of their own minds, barely conscious enough to exchange more than a few gruff words between each other. To Lisbet and Banning they spoke not at all, though fortunately they followed the orders of the outlander cultists without question. Eola suspected she held a position of reverence in the minds of the elves, not unlike Namira herself. She roused their spirits with her boisterous prayers, and brought out for a few minutes the true servants of decay they would one day become.

Some, like Ayndil, had left this state of tortured obedience behind them mere hours after arriving at the citadel under Red Mountain. Every day, he roused more of the elves to his cause, and they looked upon Eola with clear eyes full of determination. It was all the more fortunate that Ayndil had emerged as a leader, for Eola's Dunmeris was rough at best. He was a joyless creature, but a loyal one. *And far more useful to me than Banning or Hogni have been. With Sanyon gone for certain, I'll need to start rebuilding my inner circle.*

"Greetings, brother." Eola rose from the bed and nodded respectfully to the thin Dunmer. Ayndil was all harsh angles and wrinkled skin, and his nose was like a hawk's beak. His graying black hair was gathered up into a top-knot at the back of his head. "Is everything well?"

"Not in the slightest." Ayndil frowned. "Ashlanders. The savages have struck again. The group bringing more meat from Balmora was waylaid. No survivors."

Eola cursed. "These natives are becoming more and more of an annoyance. What of the corpses?"

"The bodies were burned. Charred to the bone, so we cannot even scavenge the flesh of the fallen."

"Well, no matter. We've enough food for a few weeks yet."

"I'm not certain the scant recruits we reaped from their village are worth this trouble." Ayndil flexed his right hand. He'd badly burned it on the night Balmora died, and now he wore a black glove on the damaged appendage. He knelt before her now. "My lady. Allow me to take a few dozen of the chosen and purge Vvardenfell of these vermin. The tribals use weapons of bone and chitin. We have dwarven armaments and steel from the city. They will be like scathecrow before the scythe."

"So eager, Aymdil. You truly are Namira's general." Eola put a hand on his shoulder. "Alas, your strength will be needed here. I have been granted a look through the eyes of one of our fallen brothers. He was slain on the southern shore, his spine shattered on the rocks."

Aymdil grimaced. "The Ashlanders?"

"Nay. Knight-Paladin Gelebor, warrior of Akatosh."

Lisbet's gasp brought her no small amount of pleasure. *Soon, my dear. So soon now I can taste it.*

Aymdil's eyes widened. "Truly? The snow elf? Oh, goddess. I've had many dreams of this day. You need just say the word. I will shepherd the meal of prophecy to our feasting chamber."

Eola shook her head. "Gelebor will come to us, in time. I've no doubt the Nerevarine is with him, she with the blood of the holy staining her hands, and we won't be able to separate them with brute force alone. I suspect they will take refuge with the Urshilaku. It's a pity Namira's dreamers among the Ashlanders have already joined us. I would have liked to have an ear within our adversary's forces."

"Mayhaps I could infiltrate the village." Aymdil seemed so eager. *I wish I had an enemy to point him at, but I cannot risk injuring the meal of prophecy prematurely.*

"No. Your place is here. I need you to train the other Dark Elves, brother. After the promised meal will come a time of darkness. When we return to Skyrim, it will be a land of constant bloodshed and strife. If we're going to make it to Markarth, we'll need to be strong. All of us"

He sighed. "Very well. I trust in your judgement, Eola. You have led us faithfully." *Thus far*, seemed the unsaid words. Eola did not yet have a full measure of Aymdil, and she didn't trust anyone in the world completely, save for Lisbet. She felt ill, leaving him on this sour note.

"Brother," Eola called out, when he was halfway through the door. He looked back.

"Yes?"

"The first bite of the Knight-Paladin." She grinned. "It will be yours. With that initial taste, you will change the world forever."

"I..." Aymdil swallowed. "I am not worthy."

"That is for Namira to decide. Now, begone."

After the door closed, Eola nearly collapsed onto the bed, her legs trembling. Even that small discussion had drained her massively. *The worship takes its toll in blood and strength.*

"Oh, Eola." Lisbet laid down on the end of the bed and stroked her aching calves. "You don't know how it makes me feel, to see you like this. Is there anything I can do to help? Anything at all?"

"There is nothing." But a sudden thought came to Eola. She'd done some clandestine research in Understone Keep in preparation for their voyage, and had run across an interesting tidbit of information concerning a local phenomenon. "Wait. I've just remembered...heart stones."

Lisbet looked up. "What?"

"A peculiar ore, found only on Vvardenfell and Solstheim. It was produced as a byproduct of the eruption, so I'm certain we could find some nearby." Eola strained her memory to recall more

details. "Necromancers utilize them to extend the duration of their undead."

"...I think I understand." Lisbet squeezed her foot and smiled hopefully. "We don't need to raise any corpses, but the heart stones could help you with your preservation spells on the food stores. You wouldn't have to cast them as often. Is that right?"

Eola returned her smile. "There's only one way to find out." In truth, she had little idea if such a process would work, but relieving some of Lisbet's worries was worth the trouble.

Lisbet sprung up. "I'll go looking right away! Don't you move a muscle."

"My hero," Eola purred, and laid her head down.

"This is folly." Akh'idzo sat cross-legged on his cot. "By Akatosh. You'll all end up feeding these monsters, mark my words."

"Hush," Habi replied, from the dark corner of their cell. She stroked Jo'ahni's fur and tried to send calming thoughts to the young Alfik. Renji had told her his sister couldn't speak yet, but on several occasions now Habi had felt Jo's consciousness brush against her own. Flashes of another's memories surfaced in Habi's mind, of a land alien to her senses. Fields of tall plants as golden as the sun's reflection off the Odai, and snow stretching as far as the horizon. A sky so shockingly blue that it made her dizzy to think of it. The air itself, so frigid that it turned her lungs into lead weights. *This must be Skyrim*. Only being trapped under Red Mountain could make Habi think fondly of travelling to the land of the Nords.

"It's been too long," Akh'idzo said. "Something must have gone awry."

Habi scowled. "I said hush, please. Your negative energy isn't helping Jo, here. I'm sure Renji will be back soon."

Ahk'idzo huffed and turned away from them. Aside from explaining to her that Renji and Jo'ahni *were* actually Khajiit and not fabricated products of her broken mind, he hadn't been much help in the past few days. *I guess I should be grateful he didn't just turn us in to Banning*. It still upset Habi to see him eat of the sacred dead every evening, but Ahk'idzo was an amicable enough cellmate most of the time. *And he doesn't complain about my nightmares*. Images of Erandur's destroyed body haunted her sleeping hours. She hoped dearly that Jo and Renji hadn't taken any looks inside her mind when she thought of such things. *Who am I kidding? Renji has probably seen much worse, sneaking around this place for weeks*.

As if on cue, the ruffled little Khajiit appeared at the bars to their cell and quickly squeezed inside.

"Renji," Habi exclaimed, as loud as she dared. "Thank Azura. Did you get it?"

Mind talk only, Habs. S'wits nearby.

She closed her lips tightly and nodded. Renji padded across the cell, his tail in the air, and rubbed his head against Jo's for a moment before grabbing her by the scruff and hiding behind Habi. She could feel the Khajiit against her back, two little bundles of warmth.

The moons blessed Renji. Banner is on the sugar, or just sleepy and dumb. Took his little sword and his carrot too. Hid them close by.

A carrot? That wasn't part of the plan.

Was hungry. Tired of eating slimy rat.

Habi was pleased beyond measure. It had been a colossal risk, sending Renji to steal from Banning, but she saw no other way of getting them all out of Red Mountain alive. No matter how many rats Renji brought to the cell, eventually the time would come when Eola and her cultists would put into action their evil plot, whatever it was. *A Redoran Guard is a mer of action*, one of her books had said. *He doesn't wait for Baar Dau to fall. He climbs the sky and smashes it into a million pebbles.* Ahk'adzi could eat the dead and gather his strength all he wanted, but if Banning showed up at their cell one morning with a crossbow he was going to die just like Erandur had. *And so will we.*

What now, Habs? Renji shifted restlessly. We know where the key is. Renji and Jo need to go. Can't hide forever.

The time isn't right yet. We have to wait for an opportunity.

What's opportunity, Habs?

She crossed her legs and affected an expression of weary defeat. There was someone coming down the passageway. *The moment that we're the strongest we can be and they're as weak as they're going to get.*

A figure slid into the shadows near the front of their cell. A bent head peered between the bars, strands of blond hair just visible. Habi felt a jolt of fear pass through her gut. *Banning wouldn't be so coy. Who in Oblivion is this?*

"Hello?" Habi spoke. "Can we help you?" *Conformity and compliance, Habi. Make them think you're broken.*

"All in good time, my sweet." Eola shifted into the light, and her mad green eyes bore into Habi like a scribe's mandibles. "Your kin has landed on Vvardenfell."

Habi nearly stood up, remembering at the last second the two beings behind her. "What?"

"The Nerevarine," Eola sang. "She who has caused so much trouble for us. Why do you think I spared you the wonders of Balmora, my sweet fool? You are my last shield against the wrath of Namira's adversary. Should my hunting trip go poorly, I will still have you to use against her."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about. What's a Nerevarine?" Habi's mind raced. *Nadene, on Vvardenfell? I can't believe it.*

Eola pressed herself against the cell bars. "If you're going to lie, at least make it convincing. Every elf on this island knows what she is, but you're the only one who knows who."

"I don't have anything to say to you, murdering n'wah," Habi replied through her teeth. "If you want to know her name, go ask her."

"Oh, I intend to." Eola's wide eyes unsettled Habi more than she wanted to admit. *Does the woman even blink?* "And when I return, in success or failure, we're going to put an end to your defiance. You don't think I've noticed that your Khajiit friend has been eating for two, these past few days?"

Habi froze. She looked down and put her palms against the ground. *Please, Azura. Take me if you want, but let the children go.*

"I don't know how you're doing it," Eola continued. "But I'm pretty smart, Habi. I think I'll find out

soon enough. Perhaps I'll force you to eat whatever traitor has been providing the rats."

"Eola?" Banning staggered into view, rubbing his forehead. Habi never thought she'd be pleased to see the greasy Breton. "Whatdya need? You don't gotta worry, I've been making sure this one eats her food. Clean plate every night."

"Marvellous work," Eola said flatly. "If I need anything from you, Banning, you'll be the first to know. I'm going away for a day or two. Obey Lisbet and Aymdil's orders as if they were my own."

"Huh? Where are you goin'?" Banning stared after Eola's retreating form, dumbfounded.

"None of your concern."

"Hey! There's no way I'm taking commands from a greyskin. Eola!" Their voices faded as they went farther down the cavern, and Habi was relieved.

Danger, Habs?

Big danger. Habi wasn't sure how much Renji understood, but she had to make sure he was ready to act. *Their leader is leaving, and when she gets back she's going to hurt us. All of us.*

Renji shuddered. **Leave soon. Habs, Renji and Jo must leave very soon.**

Leave very soon, Habi grimly agreed. *Leave, and no looking back.*

Many Fall, But One Remains

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this one, was a bit busy with exams and the holidays. Should be smooth sailing from here, as we approach the end.

*"When earth is sundered, and skies choked black,
And sleepers serve the seven curses,
To the hearth there comes a stranger,
Journeyed far 'neath moon and star." - The Stranger*

The rain fell with such ferocity, it seemed that all the Daedra in Oblivion must have been cursing the Valley of the Winds. In the dim light of the moons, Gelebor watched small streams of murky water form between the yurts of the Urshilaku village. They began as trickles and grew in power as the storm marched on, until eventually they were like small rivers running through the valley. The air smelled sharply charged, like an atronach of lighting.

Gelebor sat at the flap to the yurt and counted the moments between thunderclaps. Occasionally, a gust of wind would direct the rainfall inward and cool drops of water would run down his pale face. He never counted higher than four before the thunder cracked down on the village like a whip. He'd never enjoyed storms. But it had not been this tempest that disturbed Gelebor's rest.

The other occupants of the yurt had woken up a little while ago. Kharjo was sipping a cup of tea that Nadene had warmed, and leafing through an old book she'd produced from one of her satchels. The spine read: *Guide to Vvardenfell*. The pointed outdatedness of the tome did not seem to dissuade either of Gelebor's travelling companions.

Kharjo seemed eager to find his revenge, now that they were on the island, and Nadene seemed eager to find a path to Red Mountain that did not involve speaking to the Urshilaku's Wise Woman ever again. She sat with the priest Erandur in the corner of the yurt. They spoke in whispered voices. For whose benefit, Gelebor did not know. The torrential downpour would certainly prevent anyone from finding rest anytime soon.

He shut his eyes and tuned out the sound of rain, focusing his ears towards the quiet conversation behind him.

"A young woman, light of hair." Erandur said in a cool, clear tone. His hands rested on his injured legs. "Breton or Nord, I could not distinguish. I've not spent much time among the former. She was missing one of her eyes. From what I could tell, she is a gifted sorcerer."

"Her name's Eola," Nadene replied. "I didn't know about the eye. Don't know that it means a blasted thing. Did she seem professionally trained, to you? I know the Mages Guild dissolved, but there are little pocket organizations of spellcasters all over Tamriel."

"Hmm. Interesting question. When I lived in Skyrim, my place of worship was not too far from the College of Winterhold. I visited the grounds on occasion, and do not recall ever meeting a one-

eyed Namira cultist. I believe she would have made an impression. As well, her magicka tasted wilder than I would expect from a former student of the college. Powerful, but loose. I possessed much the same aura, in my younger decades, as I was brought up by a small enclave of gifted mages unrecognized by the Empire."

"That might be good news for us." Nadene shifted restlessly. She kept glancing past Gelebor's shoulder to the unrelenting rainfall, as if she could force the sky to clear by willpower alone. "Lack of formal arcane instruction means this cult is probably fairly small. That fits with my reasoning that a large band couldn't have made it all the way across Skyrim and on to Vvardenfell without attracting attention. And we already killed two of them on Solstheim." *We, already? She's come to trust this priest rather quickly.* It gladdened Gelebor's heart to see Nadene opening hers more easily. *Especially after what happened last night.*

"You must not forget the souls they reaped from Balmora," Erandur reminded her. "Dozens, if not a hundred Dunmer followed this woman to Red Mountain. She used the Staff of Vaermina to push them towards madness, but that alone does not account for this sudden wave of blind devotion to Namira. I suspect darker forces are at work in the shadowed caverns where they've made their home. Making the world right will not be as simple as destroying a Daedric artifact, this time."

"I didn't come to make the world right," Nadene grumbled. "This one in particular is far beyond saving. I just want Habi back."

"As do I. I apologize, once again, that she was taken under my watch, in what was supposed to be her evening of triumph."

"Oh, don't say that. I never should have let her remain on Vvardenfell in the first place. I shouldn't have let any of them come back here."

Erandur smiled sadly. "If I've learned one thing from my time on this island, it's that you should not underestimate the stubbornness of the Dunmer. I suspect if you had tried to raise a fuss about settling here, even more mer would have returned. Perhaps we'd be sitting in a Redoran tower, instead of a tent."

"Perhaps." Her hands twisted in her lap. "So much of this still seems wrong to me."

Kharjo chuckled, not looking up from his reading. "Kharjo thinks one does not need a moth priest to know the foulness of Namira's plot. They have eaten a city. They have eaten my family. Now they must die. What else matters?"

"It just doesn't make sense. These kinds of monsters thrive in the darkness, out of public view. In crowded cities, cloaked in the mess of civilization."

Gelebor chimed in, "Sanyon, the Bosmer that held me captive on Sostheim, said much the same thing. He claimed they were doing well in Markarth."

Nadene shook her head. "Then why come to an isolated, ruined island with settlements small enough that missing people are actually missed? There don't seem to be any Dunmer among their leadership. The very air is hostile to them."

Erandur made a thoughtful sound. "You said earlier their hopes rest on capturing and consuming your pale companion, there. It could be that this prophecy they're following foretold his arrival on Vvardenfell."

"But he only came here because they kidnapped Habisinulu and I asked him to help me rescue her."

By the Four Corners, Gelebor was wandering Skyrim for five years before he came to Solstheim! Any one of those cultists could have easily grabbed the poor fool and made a fine breakfast out of him."

Gelebor smiled. "I love you too, dear."

"Forgive this one for his insolence," Kharjo said softly. "These ponderings bring us no closer to Red Mountain. The Knight-Paladin has the right of it; this tome in my lap describes an island lost to time. Why do we prattle on about things that do not matter? There is no making reason of the work of monsters. We sit in a village of elves that want nothing more than to wipe out these cultists. Yet none of us are moving towards our common enemy."

"Listen, Kharjo." Nadene scowled. "Believe me, no one wants to be done with this whole mess more than yours truly. I just don't think a frontal attack is the right answer anymore. I'm sure as fuck not leading a tribe of Ashlanders up the mountain to a bunch of brainwashed townspeople so they can all kill each other. If that's the path you want to walk, be my guest. My ring is somewhere outside in the ash, if it hasn't washed away. Wear it around your neck and you can be Nerevarine. Can't do a worse job of it than I did."

I've a feeling Azura is less sympathetic to the plight of the turned Balmorans. Kill them all, she said in my vision. Gelebor sighed. *To the last mer.*

"When you say this situation feels wrong," he interjected, trying to soothe her. "What do you mean by that? Beyond the obvious, of course."

"I don't know." Nadene stood and stretched her arms above her head. "I've never been able to think straight on this island. Too many dead elves beneath the ash, maybe. Has it stopped raining?"

Gelebor glanced through the opening. "Mostly."

"Splendid. I'm going for a walk." She stepped past him. Her glass boots squelched in the wet ash, and she left small footprints behind her. She avoided the rest of the village, where the other yurts still sat without signs of movement. In the distance, torchlight flickered off the walls of the valley. *Sentries.* Nadene went in their direction.

"Kharjo is sorry if he upset her." Kharjo put his book down, evidently troubled. "But there is truth in his words. We must join with these natives to complete our mission, or leave them behind and enact justice ourselves. Every moment we waste in deliberation, Namira grows stronger." He rose and left the yurt, heading in the opposite direction that Nadene had taken.

Erandur spoke, "Your friends seem a bit divided on your next course of action."

Gelebor nodded grimly. He went over to the injured Dunmer and sat down where Nadene had been. "So they do."

"Kharjo seeks vengeance for an unforgivable crime, while your Nerevarine wants only to rescue her grandchild. What do you think, Gelebor?"

He bit his lip, pondering. *I'd wager Azura would prefer we go with Kharjo's plan, and hit them before they even know we're on Vvardenfell.* The Ashlander he'd killed yesterday kept coming to mind, his face frozen in an expression of final agony. It had been easy to kill the mer. Too easy. *What was your name?*

"I'm not certain. Everything seems so complicated, now." *I have to tell Nadene about Azura. This secret is tearing me up inside.* "Back in Raven Rock, Nadene told me she expects to meet her final

end here. The way Kharjo has been acting...I don't think he's expecting to come back from his confrontation with Eola, either. It's taken me thousands of years to find two beings that enjoy my presence, and they both seem so eager to die. I just want to come out of this storm with my friends happy and alive. And...I don't want to kill anyone else."

"I pray to Lady Mara that no more blood will be shed, among Namira's followers or our own people." The kindly priest's chin fell. "But I've lived too long and seen too many die to believe it will be so. I'm not sure what god you hold faith with, if any, but I hope they watch over you closely in the days to come."

Gelebor thought of Auriel. He had scarcely caught a glimpse of the sun's light since landing on Vvardenfell. *Is this what you wanted, father? I found them. I found the Falmer. All I need do is massacre a cult for a Daedric Prince. Would that satisfy you, at last?*

"Thank you for your blessing," he said to Erandur. "I'm going to go speak to Nadene."

"That'd probably be for the best." Erandur glanced past his shoulder. Gelebor turned to see a small figure clad in bonemold armor standing at the threshold, glaring fiercely. He realized with a start that this was the same being who'd led him to the yurt last night and offered a parting curse. "It seems young Eldrus and I are due a meeting. Good luck with your own conversation, Gelebor."

He nodded and left the two Dunmer to talk. As Gelebor stepped outside and began walking away, he heard the child begin to speak behind him: "Have you found a cure?" Then the child's voice faded, and Gelebor found himself alone among the yurts of the Urshilaku camp. The clouds had ceased their onslaught, but it was not yet day. He stood still for a minute, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. In the distance the torches of the sentries glowed like the vale fireflies he'd once watched every evening of his life. No Ashlanders came to challenge him; it may be that they feared his strange pale skin and distrusted the Aedric armor he wore, as Sakani did. *More likely that they're afraid of incurring Nadene's wrath by accosting one of her companions. Whether she chose it or not, she is near a god to these mer.*

For all the uncomfortable hours Gelebor had now spent on Vvardenfell, he had not yet seen a glimpse of the sun. He looked up at the dark clouds as he walked, frowning. *Do you watch me still, father? Even here?* There was a bitter pleasure; the thought of Auriel observing his sole remaining Knight-Paladin travelling with the Nerevarine and making pacts of massacre with a Daedric Prince. *I am the mer he made me.* These dark musings were coming to his mind now more easily than they had on Solstheim, and Gelebor pushed them away less often. There was little enough happiness to be found on this island. Why not entertain himself with petty thoughts of Auriel's displeasure? *If these cultists get what they desire, I'll never have to face him. The Scuttling Void will be my final resting place. And is an eternity of pain worse than an eternity of ignorance? At least I will have something to do.*

He found Nadene at the mouth of the valley, watching the streams of runoff cut through the mounds of ash. She sat on a flat rock, her knees drawn up against her chest. Gelebor joined her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Nadene leaned on him and closed her eyes.

"Have you taken your potion today?"

"Yes," he replied. "If Vvardenfell kills me, it won't be from ashlung."

"Good." She tapped her fingers on his breastplate. Gelebor sensed she had more to say, and waited patiently.

"They never even knew my name, you know. My real name. None of them cared to learn it. They

never even *asked*."

"Who?"

"Vivec. Almalexia. Sotha Sil. And Dagoth Ur, of course. All of Nerevar's friends that I was so fortunate to inherit. Characters in a story that transpired centuries before I was even born. A story that became mine own, by the will of Azura. I never got a chance to make my own friends, Gelebor. Or my own enemies. When I was seventeen, I was sent to Vvardenfell and told that I was actually a dead warlord come again. I was born to be someone else."

He frowned. "I can't imagine that."

"And if I didn't like it, the island and then all of Morrowind would fall to darkness. So I learned to put Nadene Othryn away in a box, because no one seemed very interested in her anyway, besides my father. I wore Nerevar's mask and name, and I finished the work he left unfinished. I struck down his friends from the godly realm and buried them in the ash. All the while Nadene was waiting in that box. Waiting for her turn. I was beginning to think it was time to let her out again, but maybe that was a mistake."

"No." Gelebor squeezed her shoulder. "It was *not*. I don't want Nerevar. I never will. He has poor taste in friends and little care for the mer who Azura chose to carry his burdens. I fell in love with Nadene, when you've seen fit to bless me with her presence. Nadene who so tenderly attended to her garden and guars, who raised a beautiful forest to hide the scars of the Red Year. I've met your friends and found them to be extraordinary. Master Sadri of the Retching Netch, who gave me lodging so I could survive on an island that wished me dead. Kharjo, the bravest Khajiit I've come across in all my years, who has seen the worst of the world and emerged with a kinder heart than most. Lord Divayth Fyr, the greatest sorcerer who ever lived, who survived the fires of Red Mountain and helped us along in our quest. You're not a warlord. You don't enjoy killing. You're nothing like him. Give me Nadene, for now and always. Throw Nerevar away, as you did his ring. Let him rest."

"But I can't. Don't you understand?" Nadene bit her lip. "I'm not strong. Not like he is. Vvardenfell does not suffer weakness. Namira wants blood, and so do Azura and her Ashlanders. Even Kharjo wants it. Who are we, that would stop the slaughter? The only mer we've found that might stand with us can not stand at all. Erandur preaches mercy, but Mara has no place here. It's hopeless."

His heart fell. "Is it not worth at least trying?" *Though it would doom the Falmer, to spare any of the cultists.* "It's not just Namira's followers that would die in the fighting. These Ashlanders have never known true battle, and it's far easier to defend a fortress than to take one." Gelebor had learned the truth of that soon after the Betrayed had scoured the Vale. He'd fallen on the Inner Sanctum with his sword countless times, only to return to his wayshrine with cuts and bruises across his body and failure in his soul.

Sakani spoke, "The eastern shore may provide the answers you seek." He looked up sharply, not having heard the old Dunmer approach. She stood with her hands hidden in the sleeves of her robes, watching them with a strange expression on her harsh face. *How long has she been here?* "Forgive me...Nadene, was it? Long years have passed since this ash-blown crone has spoken to one not leal to our lady. I forgot myself earlier, lost in the throes of my faith. Now hear this. If you want the true measure of the vile servants of Namira, those you hope in vain to treat with, go look upon the Telvanni holdings and see what has become of the wizard lords. Look upon the wicked works of our adversary. Then you will know the enmity between us can not be bridged."

Nadene straightened, and Gelebor's hand fell from her shoulder. "Divayth Fyr told me Master

Neloth came to Vvardenfell. If you know what became of him, tell me now." He immediately saw her purpose. *A Telvanni wizard would be a powerful ally, against the odds facing us.*

"I live to serve Azura's chosen." Sakani bowed her head. Gelebor wished he could divine intent from her voice or posture, but his time alone in the Vale had eroded his social senses. He suspected the same of Nadene, from her time in the wilds. *If only Kharjo or Erandur were here to take their measure of this supposed friend.* "Alas, the eastern way is harsh and perilous, and I am but an old wise woman. I would only slow you down, and there are preparations to be made here in the village. The boy can take you to their towers. Eldrus. My kin."

"Hours ago you wanted me to lead your tribe to Red Mountain with fire and sword. Now I'm meant to go on some sort of expedition to the Telvanni, led along by a child?"

"Azura has spoken these orders to me, but it is for you to take meaning from them. I know of only two certainties: these vermin must be removed, and you must be the instrument of this cleansing. If nothing else, you may find a path to Red Mountain from the eastern coast. No Urshilaku knows the way." Sakani raised a shaky hand to her brow. "Forgive me, Nadene. My audience with our lady has left me faint at heart. Eldrus has already made ready for your journey. If you want to find your lost kin before it is too late, you must depart immediately. May Azura guide your steps."

They watched the wise woman shuffle back towards the village, moving as slowly as an inebriated netch. *Is her weakness a farce? The mer who led us to this valley seemed much stronger than this one.* Perhaps Sakani spoke the truth, and communicating with Azura had taken its toll on her. *But why is the Daedra speaking to her in the first place?* It could be that Azura did not trust him to carry out her instructions, and she wanted an additional agent on Vvardenfell enforcing her will.

If that was the case, the Prince of Twilight had made no mention of Sakani in Gelebor's dreams. *An implied threat? Is Sakani's very presence meant to remind me of what I stand to lose, if I refuse Azura?* He was too tired to puzzle out the web of prophecies and allegiances that seemed to haunt his every waking hour nowadays. Thinking of Azura only brought to mind the secret, as heavy as a paragon stone in his heart. *I have to tell Nadene.*

"I don't trust that one," She murmured, after Sakani had left their sight. "No one has ever wanted me to spill that much blood for a good reason. These aren't Sixth House cultists we're fighting against. They can be saved. But I suppose we might as well do as she suggested. For Habi's sake, if nothing else. Once we find a way to the mountain, we can make a final decision."

Sakani's words had not sounded like suggestion to Gelebor, but he had no wish to fan the flames of discord.

"Yes," he replied. "As Kharjo said, we aren't getting any closer to Habi just waiting around here. Let's go." *I'll speak to her once we reach the Telvanni. For now, we must focus on the journey ahead. On this island, any distractions could prove fatal.*

Kharjo and their young Dunmer guide were already ready to leave by the time they returned to the guest yurt. Eldrus wore fitted bonemold armor from head to toe, so even his eyes were hidden, but his posture betrayed his impatience. He barely waited for Gelebor and Nadene to tie their ash masks on and bid farewell to Erandur before walking off at a brisk pace. They hastened to follow. By this hour, pale beams of sunlight peeked over the valley walls, and most of the village had woken up. Dunmer with rough faces covered in fading paint watched them go. Their eyes held only reverence for Nadene, it seemed, and any Ashlander that she passed bowed their heads as Sakani had earlier. He could almost hear Nadene grinding her teeth.

Gelebor noticed a less kind reaction to Kharjo and himself. Some of the Ashlanders merely looked at them in amazement. *I'd forgotten. It's unlikely these mer have ever encountered non-Dunmer in their lives.* The Urshilaku that weren't shocked were either suspicious or disgusted. One mer with red stripes running across his forehead spit at Gelebor's feet as he passed and muttered something in Velothi. *Probably not a blessing.* Fortunately Nadene was walking further ahead, or he suspected blood would have been spilled. As it was, he and Kharjo passed the unfriendly villagers in tense silence. Sakani did not make an appearance.

He almost breathed a sigh of relief when they passed through the mouth of the valley and left the last of the Urshilaku behind. The sky was clear, for now, and the wet ash was pleasantly firm beneath his boots. The waters of the northern coast were visible just over the hills. As always, the sight of the ocean brought Gelebor a small measure of comfort. *We could always sail away, if we had to. I'm sure the villagers could fashion together a raft.*

Eldrus did not deign to speak, and did not even turn to look back at his followers except to check the position of the rising sun. The rough terrain made conversation difficult regardless. Unlike the young Ashlander, Gelebor was unaccustomed to the geographical hazards of Vvardenfell, as were his companions. When he wasn't watching Eldrus, he was watching his own feet to make sure he didn't trip on a rock or trama root, or step into a sinkhole. The Snow Prince's armor was already coated in wet ash up to the knee plates. The sight brought a grimace to Gelebor's face. *I wonder if the Falmer smith that worked this steel ever imagined it would end up in a place like this.*

The hours passed and the silence endured. Perhaps Vvardenfell had once been home to a variety of biomes, as their outdated guide book had claimed, and perhaps there were still enclaves of colorful flora or giant mushrooms somewhere on the island, but the land they traversed remained a grim expanse of ash and blasted rock. Even on the worst parts of Solstheim, there had at least been remnants of the bountiful past and signs of new growth and renewal. Short and ugly patches of grass, but patches of grass nonetheless. Here, there was nothing at all, and little sign that would ever change. *We might as well be walking on one of the moons.*

Gelebor was inevitably consumed by his thoughts and worries. The dead Ashlander's face would not leave his mind, and he almost welcomed it as a distraction. *Better the guilt of killing one mer than the shame of killing a hundred.* For that was the inevitable result of refusing Azura's command to exterminate the cultists. *What is one mer's soul against the last of the Falmer? I've lived more lifetimes than all of those islanders put together.* Even now the Imperial scout ship that would spell doom for the last Falmer could be embarking on its dreaded voyage. When he closed his eyes, Gelebor could almost see the swift vessel cutting through the waters of the Nibenay bay, the soldiers aboard unknowingly destined to finish a purge that began millennia ago. All of a sudden, the sight of the sea made him sick. He turned away and tried to clear his mind. *Have to stay aware. We've already been attacked once out here.*

"Eldrus," Nadene said thoughtfully. "That's not a Velothi name, is it?" They stood on top of a hill, looking down at the boulder-covered shore.

"No. I mean, um. No, my lady. Nerevarine. Sorry." Even through his mask's filter, the voice was unmistakably that of a child. *Nearly a man, by the standards of his people, but a child nonetheless.* "My...my mother was from Balmora. She came to the Urshilaku after I was born."

"Please, call me Nadene. How old are you?"

"Almost thirteen." He turned to Gelebor, raising his chin. "But grandmother says I already have 'the makings of an Ashkhan'."

Gelebor smiled politely. "Is that so?"

"Yeah!" At Gelebor's unflinching attention, Eldrus seemed to wither somewhat. "Or a Gulakhan, maybe. I'd be happy with that. Until I became strong enough to lead the tribe, at least."

Nadene spoke, "Your grandmother said the last Ashkhan and his sons all went away." They started down the hill, slowly and carefully. She grabbed the boy's shoulder to steady him. "To Red Mountain. To Namira. Know anything about that?"

"Um. I don't know if she'd want me to talk about what happened." His head turned to Gelebor and Kharjo. "In front of n'wah, I mean."

Nadene's fingers tightened on Eldrus' shoulder, and brought him to a halt. "Wait. Stop here. Turn around, and take that mask off. I want to get a look at you."

He nodded, but his hands were trembling when they rose to undo the straps on the sides of the bonemold visor. Gelebor exchanged an amused glance with Kharjo, and stood back with his arms crossed.

Eldrus seemed to him a perfectly average Dunmer child. A messy tangle of black hair sat above a face clear so far of the scars and paints that had marked most of the older Ashlanders back at the Urshilaku village. It was a small, round, innocent face. *It will not long stay that way, on this island. If his mother had sense, she would have gone to the mainland instead of the Ashlands.*

"Hmm," Nadene said, studying Eldrus. "Surprising."

"What is it?" He shifted from foot to foot, his hands clasped together nervously. "Corprus? The blight?"

"I was looking for a head wound. From the way you spoke of my friends here, I assumed you must have taken a heavy blow to the skull."

He had the good sense to look ashamed for a moment, but then his eyes narrowed in anger and he pointed a small finger at Gelebor and Kharjo. "They're n'wah. *Outlanders*." He spoke the word with surprising venom. "They ruined everything!"

"What do you mean?" Nadene knelt to his level. "The Namira cultists? My friends are going to help me kick those fetchers off of Vvardenfell."

"No! Well, yes, but not only them. It was one like that one." He pointed at Kharjo. "A cat man. When one of those came to Balmora, that's when it started."

"You're not making any sense, Eldrus. You need to slow down." Nadene spoke in a cool, soothing voice. *I don't think I've seen this side of her before.* "They're called Khajiit. Names and how you use them are important, especially on this island. You'll need to learn that if you ever want to lead the Urshilaku. That being you pointed at is Kharjo. He's my friend."

Eldrus crossed his arms. "He's not mine. When the Balmora Khajiit married the city lady who sells books, grandmother said that bad things were going to start happening again, like they did when you lived here. And they did! All of a sudden, a lot of people were acting funny who'd never told a joke in their lives. Even the Ashkhan and his sons, even Ammu. I thought he was my friend, even if he cheated when we raced scribes. And my grandmother changed. Before she was so warm and kind to everyone, but now she's mean and doesn't care about anything but Azura. And then there was the night the scouts came back and said they saw smoke over Balmora. And my momma, she...she was supposed to be trading with a Balmora lady..." His bottom lip began to tremble, and tears

glistened in his small red eyes.

"What happened?" Nadene reached out and took the boy's shaking hands in her own. "It's alright, Eldrus. Your grandmother doesn't need to know you spoke to us, unless you'd like her to."

"I waited in our yurt," Eldrus said miserably. "I waited and waited, but she never came home. Even when I lit a candle and prayed to the ancestors. I prayed so long my legs started to fall asleep. Then my grandmother was there." His cheeks were wet. "She put out my candle. She said it wouldn't help anyone anymore. She said someone *ate* mamma."

"You poor child," Nadene said softly.

"I'm *not* a child," Eldrus insisted, but the expression on Nadene's face must have been too much for him. His face wrenched up and he turned away. His legs wobbled precariously, but before Gelebor could move to steady the boy, Nadene had drawn him into a hug. Eldrus wrapped his arms around her glass armor and began sobbing, hiding his face from the others.

"Khajiit's heart breaks for the young Ashlander," Kharjo spoke. "But he thinks we need to be moving on soon. The moons are old companions to him, and he knows they will be rising soon. Clan Mother Ahnissi named Namira the Great Darkness for good reason. When night falls, the hunters will become the hunted."

"I agree." Gelebor nodded to the horizon. "At the top of the hill, I believe I could see the eastern shore. We can't be far from our destination. Eldrus?"

Eldrus withdrew from Nadene's embrace and looked up at Gelebor. His face was red and damp.

"You've bravely taken us all this far. In all my time in the lands of the Dark Elves, I've never seen someone walk the ashes with such deftness and grace. Would you permit me to lead us the rest of the way, while you gather your strength? I'm sure we'll need it when we arrive at the Telvanni estates."

The boy nodded shakily, and quickly wiped the tears from his cheeks. *Yes. You'll need to be strong, stronger than any twelve year old should ever have to be.*

"Thank you. Perhaps you can tell me about racing scribes, along the way. Is it as difficult as it sounds?"

The corner of Eldrus' mouth turned up. "Well. A little bit, at first." He licked his lips. "You have to find the right size string, first of all..."

They continued their descent down the hill. The setting sun set aglow the dark waters of the Inner Sea. The ash was soft beneath his boots. *Another day ends on Vvardenfell. And what will the sunrise bring, should we live to see it?* Gelebor had a feeling that once they reached the Telvanni, any peace he might have found on this island would come to a sudden end. *As soon as we arrive, I'll tell Nadene about Azura. She can leave me with the wizards or banish me to Red Mountain. But for now, I can enjoy the sunset, and the company.*

Good, or Don't Be

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! How fitting that it's the Year of the Rat, as this chapter is dedicated to good old Peryite, the Lord of Pestilence. Please review if you continue to enjoy!

"You are bold. I honor your independence. You are one to teach the gods their limits. I hope the bards will praise the glory of your death in song." - Dagoth Ur

The fog fell on them like a smothering blanket, cloying and warm. It was strange, unpleasant weather, unlike any Gelebor had encountered in his life, but it reflected well the growing dread inside him. It was simple enough to say you were going to do something horrible to yourself, but performing the act was something entirely different. *The secret. It can't wait any longer. Once we reach the Telvanni, it will be too late.* He'd once heard it said the anticipation of agony was sometimes worse than the agony itself. He dearly hoped this turned out to be one of those cases.

The shore was close enough now that Gelebor could hear crashing waves, even through the muffling fog. Eldrus walked to the right of him, behind Kharjo. Nadene had taken the lead as soon as the silhouettes of mushroom towers had materialized in the distance. None of them seemed to be as tall as Tel Mithryn or even Nadene's late homestead, but Gelebor considered it impressive the Telvanni had managed to grow anything at all on the blasted island. Or, he would have been impressed, had the towers not represented the end of the line. *The secret! Waiting will only make it worse. Every minute that passes is a betrayal. Tell her, now, now, do it-*

"Nadene," he said quietly. "I need to talk to you about something."

"What?" She glanced over her shoulder.

"It's a delicate matter. Best discussed alone, I think."

"Can it wait?" She nodded towards the horizon. "We're nearly there."

"No." Gelebor stopped. "It can not." Kharjo halted with him, but Eldrus continued on obliviously until he walked into Nadene's back. She gently steadied the boy and then looked at Gelebor, concern evident in her face.

"Okay. Kharjo, would you mind waiting with Eldrus for a minute?"

"No problem. This Khajiit and the young elf will stay low and watch the towers for movement. Our enemy has likely preceded us."

She handed him a tightly bound scroll. "Here. I don't want us to lose each other in the fog. I assume you know how to use one of these things."

"Yes. This one produces a fire bolt?"

Nadene shook her head. "Fire *ball*. Much bigger explosion. Either aim it at the sky, or aim it very very carefully somewhere else, if trouble comes. Gelebor and I will be able to find you, whatever you choose."

The two old elves left them, walking off into the fog with their hands clasped tightly together. To keep track of each other in the mist, more than anything, but Gelebor still found the warmth of her touch comforting in light of what he was preparing to do. *These could be our final moments. If I have to choose between destroying our love or destroying the Snow Elves, is there really any choice at all?* The terrifying thing was how difficult he was finding the decision to be. *Well, it's about to be done with. For better or for worse.*

They sat down on a large flat rock on the edge of the beach. The edge of the dark sea was barely visible. Through a patch of clear sky, the twin moons shone down on them: Masser, turned an unsettling shade of crimson by the Vvardenfell air, and Secunda white as bone scoured clean by fire. Gelebor raised his hand and found it to be trembling.

"What's wrong?" Nadene frowned, and reached out for him, but Gelebor shifted away. "Please. We promised each other there would be no more secrets between us, remember? Whatever's happening, you can tell me."

"I can't. Or, I don't want to." He couldn't look her in the eyes. "I'm afraid I'm going to ruin it all. You're going to leave me, or make me leave. And if that happens again, I think I just might have to die."

"There's nothing you could say that would make that happen." Nadene respected his wish not to be touched, but she moved closer to him and tried to catch his gaze. "I love you, endling. There are no conditions, no standards. Not any longer. Once I've made up my mind about someone, nothing as small as a conversation on a beach can change how I feel."

"You can't say that. You have no idea what I'm going to tell you."

"Remember who you're talking to." He saw her smile wearily, out of the corner of his eye. "I've suffered more strangeness than most who walk Tamriel. But I don't want to go into battle with this burden hanging between us. Tell me what's the matter. I promise I won't be upset."

Gelebor took a deep breath. His stomach felt like a ball of iron. "I've been having visions. For several days now. Someone has been coming to me in my dreams."

Nadene went very still. She spoke carefully, "Namira? Or someone else? Please don't tell me they were wearing a mask of some sort."

"No. She told me who she was." He swallowed. *This is it.* "The Prince of Dawn and Dusk. Azura. I'm sorry, Nadene, I know I should have told you earlier."

"Azura?" Nadene snorted. "What does that fetcher want with you, of all the mer in Morrowind?"

"She's offering a bargain. Azura showed me an island of Snow Elves, nearly untouched by time, hidden away from the rest of the world. Then she showed me what's going to happen to them, without my help. An Imperial scout ship will land on the island, and following a series of misunderstandings, the last of my people will be wiped out forever."

"Sounds like some serious misunderstanding. And what does the powerful and benevolent Lady of Twilight want in return for her timely intervention?"

Gelebor turned his head. The glow of Red Mountain was apparent even through the mist. He nodded his head towards the volcano. "A total massacre of the cult of Namira. None must be left to preach the words of Azura's adversary. She seems to have taken it as a personal affront that another Prince has decided to launch an attack on Nirn from what was once a major outpost of her own

forces."

"Petty and merciless. Sounds like Azura, all right. So have you decided yet? Whether to kill them all, or not?"

He took a moment to respond. *Hadn't expected to get this far, really.* "That course of action would seem to run contrary to our earlier discussions. You and I were going to be the voices of mercy. I don't know how I feel about taking so many lives in the name of a Daedric Prince. I don't want to see any more bloodshed. But..."

"This could be your only chance to save the Snow Elves from extinction." Nadene sighed. "I see your dilemma. One could even reason that this is the reason Auriel has preserved your life for so long. Maybe it's your destiny to exterminate this band of cannibals."

"I have considered that. You've had close experience with Azura. What do you think I should do?"

Nadene reached for his hand again, and this time Gelebor let her take it. When she looked at him, there was a bitter smile on her face. A cloud passed in front of the moons, momentarily darkening the beach. The air smelled of ash and salt.

"I did everything Azura asked of me, to save Vvardenfell." She patted the blasted rock they sat upon. "And here we are. Here I am, again, back where it all started. If I hadn't destroyed the Heart of Lorkhan, if I hadn't killed Vivec, then Baar Dau would never have fallen on Vivec City. Thousands and thousands of lives would have been saved, Divayth Fyr's daughters among them. I don't know if what Dagoth Ur was planning would have been worse for Morrowind, after what the Red Year did to us. I don't know if I could have found another way to stop him. If Azura is telling the truth to you, and she can see the future, then it means she set me on the path that led to Morrowind's greatest ruin. And if she didn't see the Red Year coming, then she can't know for certain what's going to happen to your Snow Elves, either."

"You're right." Gelebor rubbed his forehead. "Of course you're right. But if there's even the slightest chance that she's being true with me, then refusing her could be the greatest mistake of my life."

"Well, at least it's your mistake to make. Beats guarding a shrine for five thousand years, by my estimate." Her eyes brightened. "No one could say the monsters we're hunting don't deserve to be wiped out. Whatever you decide, Gelebor, you have my bow. I'll follow you into Oblivion, if you ask me to."

A wave of relief washed over him. At best, Gelebor had expected her to banish him from her presence forever. *I must remember why I love this elf.* "Thank you. It means the world to me to have someone like you in my life. You're truly not upset?"

She raised her brow. "Of course I'm upset. You didn't ask to have someone come into your dreams and order you around, no more than I did two centuries ago. When we return to the Urshilaku village, I'm going to pay a visit to the Cavern of the Incarnate. Azura and I need to have some words."

He wasn't sure who to be more afraid for. Her acceptance warmed him from the inside out, and for a moment Gelebor just closed his eyes and basked in her comforting presence. She leaned against him, sighing softly. For a moment he could pretend they weren't on Vvardenfell, that they hadn't come on a one-way journey to a cursed island on what was almost definitely a suicide mission.

"Do you think if we believe hard enough, we might get out of this thing alive?" Nadene asked. "I

just want to see something pretty again before I die. Is that so much to ask for?"

"No." Gelebor stroked her neck. Her glass armor was cold against him, but her skin was warm like the coals of a hearth. "That seems perfectly reasonable to me."

"I've thought more about where I want you to take me. After all of this is over."

"Someplace cold, wasn't it?"

"Mmm. Not so sure anymore." Her breath was smooth, steady, like a heartbeat. Gelebor imagined he could listen to it for eternity. "Remember what I said at Morvayn's dinner?"

"Oh, yes. I believe you mentioned Black Marsh."

"It's not the most frigid place on Nirn, I'll admit. But Divayth would be overjoyed to have us live at his new tower there, I just know it. He'd never admit it, but he was so happy to see us at Tel Mithryn. Happier than I've ever seen him."

Gelebor grinned. "I'm glad. I was pleased to meet Divayth, and his strange and beautiful family. I'd love to go to Black Marsh with you."

"Marvellous. It's a date, then." He felt her smile against his shoulder. "I have something else to ask you. You seem awfully fond of Eldrus. And Divayth's babies liked you near as much as Divayth himself did."

"Err, I suppose so. Eldrus seems to be an upstanding young mer, and I'd not seen infants in such a long time. They brought a sad warmth to my heart." Gelebor cocked his head. "And that wasn't a question, Nadene."

"You've caught me. Here's the question."

She never got the chance to speak. The sky lit up behind them, and they both turned around in time to see a massive ball of fire arcing through the sky.

"Kharjo," Nadene gasped, and rushed to her feet. Gelebor followed her, but they had barely taken two steps before the fireball exploded in the air and rained flames and rock on to the ash fields below. *By the gods.*

They hastened their pace, running across the ash as quickly as they dared. It was difficult to see the small cracks in the ground in the darkness, and Gelebor tripped more than once. Nadene was more adept at traversing the wastes, but his longer legs managed to make up the difference. He could feel her gathering her magic as they went, almost as an aura of power glowing against his side. It was like running next to the rising sun.

"Hold on," Nadene said, peering across the plain. Gelebor stopped, nearly panting. "I think I see them. Crouched down, over by that patch of fire fern. Let's approach carefully. Whatever made Kharjo use the scroll might still be lurking around."

"Good thinking." Gelebor drew his mace and stayed close to Nadene's back. They crept towards the two figures hidden like mudcrabs in the sand.

"Kharjo," He called out when they were close enough. "It's us. Don't attack, please."

"Khajiit is pleased to see you return." Kharjo stood up and sheathed his sword. Eldrus held a small dagger of his own, but did not yet put it away. He glared suspiciously at the night sky, barely

sparing a glance for Nadene or Gelebor.

"What'd you see?" Nadene asked. "Was it the cultists?"

"No." Kharjo held out the fireball scroll, clearly unused. "He seemed to be a Telvanni. At least as far as I can tell. All Dark Elves look strange and do strange things, but this one was dressed in a more peculiar manner than most. Purple robes, long hair. Young, for one of the elf races."

"Doesn't sound like Neloth." She frowned, looking out at the dark wastes towards the mushroom towers shrouded in shadow. "Probably one of his retainers. It was this Telvanni that shot a fireball at you?"

"Khajiit did not see where the projectile came from. He was more concerned with running away."

Eldrus interrupted, "Um. I saw it, ma'am. It came from behind the elf we saw. He just stood there like a statue, didn't duck down or anything. Didn't even blink."

"Good looking out," Gelebor complimented him. "Well, it seems to me our only course of action is to go out and introduce ourselves. I'm certainly not interested in killing any wizards."

Nadene replied, "You haven't met Neloth yet. But you're right. We're exposed out here, especially at night. Everyone stay low and follow me. Kharjo, keep an eye on the path behind us."

Kharjo nodded, his whiskers twitching. "Khajiit will watch our backs."

The fog had cleared and the light of the moons fell on the four as they stole across the field towards the Telvanni properties. If someone had wanted to shoot an exploding ball of flame at them right now, they would certainly have a good shot at it. Nadene and Eldrus might emerge from the blast mostly unscathed, but Kharjo was covered in fur, and Gelebor knew from experience that Falmer were not generally fireproof.

"Praise Azura," Eldrus said quietly, looking up at the towers in wonder. "I've never been this close before. How do the wizards grow 'em so big?"

"The Telvanni keep the methods of their arcane construction a closely guarded secret," Nadene told him. "I figured it out from a few stolen books and spore pods. Mine grew funny, though."

"Funny how?"

"It was short and stout. Not many branches, either. A friend of mine, Divayth Fyr, said that no Telvanni's first tower ever turns out perfect. He told me it was kind of like making hotcakes. You get better on repeated attempts."

Eldrus' brow furrowed. "What's a hotcake?"

Gelebor could see the docks now, a series of long dark shapes stretching out into the dark waters of the Inner Sea. He strained his eyes as Nadene and Eldrus continued their whispered conversation. There were still ships docked here, which meant that most of the Telvanni had to still be around somewhere. *Either that, or the cultists killed them so quickly that none had time to escape.* From what Erandur had told them of Balmora's fall, that didn't seem outside the realm of possibility. Namira's followers had turned the Dunmer of the city against each other using vile poisons, and then they'd picked off the survivors who still chose to resist the call of their dark goddess.

Even still, Gelebor had expected to see some sign of struggle or warfare by now. They passed a small guardhouse with nary a scratch on the imported wood of its walls. There were no guards in the

small pen attached to the side of the structure. *Strange, and unsettling.* He'd come prepared to fight. Combat was something Gelebor could understand, even if he disliked having to resort to violence. Yet no enemies were presenting themselves in this quiet little holding. No enemies, and no survivors, either.

"No walls to protect them," Eldrus commented. "I thought all outlander castles had walls."

Nadene scoffed. "No reason to waste the building materials. Everything on this island is supposed to be dead. Kharjo, do you see any sign of the mer from earlier?"

"Khajiit thinks we would have come upon him by now." Kharjo's eyes darted around warily. Gelebor envied him his night vision, not for the first time. Even with the moons light at full strength, he disliked the look of the shadows surrounding them. "No. The Dark Elf has moved. Into one of the buildings, perhaps."

The largest of the towers was on the edge of the perimeter, right next to the docks. The other two were further inland, but all of the massive structures were close enough together that walking between them would not be a chore. Smaller dwellings of stone and wood were dotted between them, some of which had fungal roots sprouting from their tops. *Towers in the making, I presume.* The simple dirt paths were strangely clear of clutter or debris.

"Where are the Telvanni?" Gelebor asked, a seed of dread growing in his stomach. "Something awful happened here, Nadene. I feel we should leave with all possible haste."

"We're almost to Neloth's tower." She had her bow at the ready. "If nothing else, the old fetcher will have some potions and scrolls we could use in the battles to come. I'm not leaving this place empty-handed. Okay?"

"Very well." He would follow Nadene anywhere, after their earlier talk on the beach. It wasn't as if she wouldn't do the same for him. "Do you remember that spell you cast, when we were scouting the bandit citadel on Solstheim?"

Nadene paused. They stood in the shadow of one of the smaller houses, just before the fungal walkway leading to Neloth's tower. "Detect life. Can't believe I didn't think of that. I'll need to concentrate for a minute." She knelt down, resting her back against an empty crate. Kharjo stood on her left, his sword drawn, and Gelebor covered her right.

The spell only lasted a few moments, but that was all the time Gelebor needed. All around the Telvanni property, silhouettes of shimmering gold lit up through the walls. In the house they hid behind, three life forms were standing motionless in the main chamber. There were enough beings around here to field a formal Redoran dinner, but the air remained deathly still and soundless.

"Wow," Eldrus said breathlessly. "Those glowy shapes are all elves? How're they staying so quiet?"

"A good question." Nadene accepted Gelebor's hand, and he pulled her to her feet. "Let's go ask them. Do you mind getting the door, love?"

"Wait." Gelebor whispered harshly. "I'm not absolutely sure...but I thought I saw something move in this structure. A flash of excitement, in the corner of my eye. I could've been imagining things."

Kharjo's hand rested on his sword hilt. "This Khajiit thinks it best we not take chances, where the servants of Namira are concerned."

"This Dunmer agrees with you." Nadene beckoned them all to step farther away from the door.

"No harm meant, Kharjo, but I wouldn't trust that elven armor to stop anything sharper than steel. You should take the lead, ending. Tell us how we should handle this."

There was an unsaid offer in her words: *if you want to wipe out the cultists, feel free to start with this one*. It sent a surge of power through Gelebor to know how deeply she trusted him to act justly. *But could this be merely a test? If I strike down this intruder in cold blood, will Nadene turn against me?* There was no time to ponder on hidden meanings and verbal traps. Even now, the figure he saw could be heading towards them.

"Very well," he said quietly, his mind racing. "I have an idea. I'm willing to wager that whoever is in that house, they haven't yet heard us. Or at least I dearly hope so."

"Can I help?" Eldrus asked, already reaching for the dagger on his belt.

"Of course." Gelebor knelt down. He gently took the blade from the boy's hand and then looked into his large red eyes. "You are an essential part. I'm going to need you to be very brave, at least on the inside. Can you do that for me?"

"I..." Eldrus swallowed. In the shroud of darkness, if Gelebor squinted his eyes, the child could almost pass for Vyrthur. *Perhaps I will end up killing this boy, as well. Is that why you've kept my alive, father? To cover young faces in dirt and graveworms?* "I can do it. I'm not afraid."

"I know you're not." Gelebor smiled. "But I'm going to need you to act like you are."

The air in the house was stale and still, heavy with the scent of unwashed bodies and rotten food. Three Dunmer stood motionless in the main chamber, their eyes wide open but as dull and lifeless as chips of crimson stone. Their colorful robes marked them as definite members of House Telvanni. Whatever their affliction, they did not react when Gelebor and Nadene slipped into the room past the set tables and hid themselves in the armoire. They reminded him of the Dwemer automatons that made short work of his fallen brothers under the ground. He wondered if the three mer were looking back at him, somewhere in the tortured depths of their minds. *Every place we go, we find more souls Namira has devoured. I have the power to end it all, and save my people in the process*. Eldrus began to cry out from the hallway leading to the entrance.

"Help," he whimpered. The sound seemed deafening in the near total silence. "Please. Someone."

From the depths of the dwelling came the sounds of cautious movement. As Eldrus continued to wail, and no one appeared to save him, the movements became more frequent and more hurried. The figure from below approached like a fox warily entering a coop of chickens. The cellar door opened silently. Gelebor and Nadene watched through the crack in the door of the armoire. He could feel her heart beating against his side.

The bloodstained Nord crawled into view, his wide eyes like shining beacons in the red ruin of his face. He was built like a bull, short and stocky, and on his back was a shield shaped like a bowl facing out. The stink of him filled the house and sent Gelebor's stomach rolling. *Like a butcherhouse left open to the sun*. Thin wisps of brown hair extruded from the sides of his head at strange angles. In one of his meaty, blood-soaked hands: a long butcher's cleaver.

"Momma," Eldrus cried. "Help me. I hurt my leg, I can't move it no more."

The Breton crawled faster across the floor, his mouth hanging open. He was slaving like a starved hound, and crimson saliva dripped from his chin and stained the carpet beneath him. He was nearly to Eldrus, now. Gelebor reached for his mace.

"Someone, you have to-" Eldrus gasped. "Oh. H-hello. You scared me."

There was no response. Gelebor pushed open the door as quickly as he dared, and he and Nadene unfolded themselves from the armoire. *Kharjo will do his part. He would not let Eldrus fall into harm's way.*

"A boy." The voice of the Nord, simple and thick, like he was speaking through a mouthful of ground sausage. "Thought you was a boy. Ain't seen none of those around here. Guess them wizard fellows ain't much in the business of makin' whelps. Heh."

"Can you help me?" Eldrus asked, his voice shaky. "I can't find my momma."

Heavy footsteps, in the hallway. The Nord had risen to his feet. Gelebor and Nadene moved towards the hallway, with painful slowness.

"Your ma." The Nord chuckled. "If she was 'round here, fella, I probably strung her up downstairs by now. Put a hook through her grayskin back. Tell you the truth, I'm growin' mighty sick of eatin' gray. Meat's tough and dark. Too much muscle. But look at you, now. A fat little bird, sent from Namira just for ol' Hogni. Take off your boots, son. Let me get a look at those little toes."

Eldrus screamed. Gelebor rushed forward, Nadene close behind him.

Hogni stood over Eldrus, the meat cleaver held high. Kharjo fell on him from above, his sword flashing out like a sharpened claw. There was a shout of pain. Blood gleamed in the air like drops of ruby rain, but Hogni spun away with a curse, slipping past Gelebor, and pulled the strange shield from his back.

"Stay away," Kharjo snarled. Eldrus lay on the floor behind him, breathing heavily.

"Fuckin' grayskins and cats." Hogni spat red on to the carpet. There was a heavy cut on his side, but the hands that held the meat cleaver and shield were unwavering. "Where in the Void did you folks come from?"

"Doesn't matter," Nadene said, the air around growing charged as she prepared a spell. "You're outnumbered, and wounded. Give yourself up, and we might let you live."

"Heh." Hogni's face was wide and ugly, and when he grinned, the dried blood on his face cracked. "Got some magic, do ya? Some special little spell? So did these other greyskins, them that lived here." He turned to one of the petrified Dunmer and swung his cleaver. The mer's neck exploded in crimson, and he crumpled to the ground like a withered sapling.

The look of that shield...unsettling. Gelebor's eyes widened. "Nadene, wait-"

She fired the spell at Hogni. He caught the emerald orb on the bowl shield, and it dissipated across the surface in a flurry of sparks.

"No." Nadene took a step back, fear in her eyes. "That's...not possible."

"Why don't ya try it again?" Hogni suggested, and then he sprinted towards her. Gelebor rushed to intercept. *No!*

Too late. Hogni knocked Nadene's bow from her hands just before she could aim her arrow, and then came the cleaver, inevitable, impossible, an image burned into Gelebor's memory like a searing brand. Singing metal and slicing flesh.

Nadene howled, blood running down her face in rivers. Gelebor's heart burned like the stone that had brought them to this cursed island, and he saw the cleaver in the air again. Hogni moaned in lust and rapture. The fury burst from Gelebor all at once, like a fire birthed from dwarven oil.

He slammed into the thinly clothed Nord with the full weight of the Snow Prince's armor. Even so, Hogni remained on his feet. Gelebor's mace was on the ground, discarded. He gripped the wrist holding the cleaver and kept it from moving, as best he could. The cannibal's breath was on his face, hot and wet, like a hearthfire fed with the bodies of the young. Little by little, Gelebor was overpowering him. Nadene's sobs of agony filled his ears and tore his soul to ribbons.

Hogni's teeth came together an inch from his throat, once and then twice. *He's an animal. Nothing but a bloody beast.* The third time, he felt Hogni's chin brush against his, and his anger reached a boiling point. Gelebor swung back his head and then brought it forward like a battering ram. Teeth and other small bones were smashed under his forehead. The destruction he wrought felt just; it felt like what he had been put on Nirn to do, all those thousands of years ago. He did it again and again until Hogni went limp in his arms and blood covered the both of them like a red sheet. His head was buzzing in pain, and there were stars in the corner of his vision.

"Enough," Kharjo said sharply, and then Hogni fell from Gelebor's grasp. He stumbled away, dizzy and delirious. "We need this one alive, my friend. As much as it pains Khajiit to say it."

"Nadene," Gelebor said, the word ringing in his mind like a bell. He fell to his knees and crawled towards her. She sat against the wall, one side of her all covered in red. She was whimpering, or that might have been him. "I love you. What is happening? I love you, I love you."

Weren't those the words that were supposed to make everything better? How could she just sit there like that? The stars in his head suddenly demanded his attention, and Gelebor had no choice but to answer them. The carpet was sticky and wet under his hands. His arms no longer had the strength to keep him from falling. He let his face hit the wetness, his eyes fluttering.

There was a little boy in the hallway, and behind him a door opened. The Khajiit moved in front of the boy, holding something long and shiny in his hands.

"You will not hurt the child," the Khajiit said warningly.

"Please spare me your theater routine." A Dunmer voice, high and commanding. "My patience has been worn supremely thin these past few days. I'm not usually in the business of exploding strange elves and catmen lurking about my tower, but rest assured I'm quite capable of doing so. Where did all this blood come from? Have you any idea how much that carpet cost?"

"Your tower?" Kharjo asked.

The conversation faded away, the words like ghosts in Gelebor's consciousness. Darkness beckoned, and he went to it gladly, and then there was nothing.

Fire and War, Part I

"Farewell, sweet Nerevar. Better luck on your next incarnation." - Dagoth Ur

"Look long upon my face. Not a mirror, but a memory. You call our lost siblings the Betrayed, but none more rightfully deserve that title than I." Vyrthur floated before him, a glimmering apparition in the void. He was young; as young as he'd been when the Snow Prince had first graced the Inner Sanctum with his holy presence. His pale face looked soft as doeskin; his eyes held no trace of the corruption that would one day take root. "We were found together in the snow. Two forgotten babes, abandoned and alone. You were my brother. The only family I had. And you murdered me."

"No," Gelebor gasped, or thought he did. He had no sense of his own form. His attention was locked on to Vyrthur, unblinking, unwavering. Physical pains were being withheld. There was only the grief, the regret, the tortured memories, festering in his dreams like a sickness. "You were ill. Molag Bal had twisted your mind towards evil. The Dragonborn, his friend...putting you to rest was the only way to save."

Vyrthur smiled sadly. "Evil? You've read too many children's tales. I'd been trapped inside the Inner Sanctum for centuries untold, dear brother. I hadn't seen a single mortal soul in my living memory. Perhaps I could have weathered the storms of time, with Auriel's guiding hand. As you did. I certainly never killed another for their blood. Could you honestly say the same about the woman you sent to murder me? The daughter of Coldharbour?"

"I trusted the Dragonborn's judgement. The things he said...you may not have taken any lives with your own hand, Vyrthur, but they informed me what set them on the long path to the Vale. If not for the prophecies of madness you whispered into Lord Harkon's ear, hundreds of souls would not have been taken in the name of the Prince of Domination over the course of that wicked crusade. Your lust for revenge against our father ruined any chance of redemption you might have had."

"There never would have been need for any vengeance, had he just provided a cure. There *is* a cure to vampirism. Did you know that?"

"I...have heard rumours."

"You could have saved me," Vyrthur hissed. "I didn't need Divine Intervention. I needed my brother. You had millenia at your disposal, Gelebor. You left me to rot inside the ravenous prison of my ruined form, until the day came when you could pass off the duty of execution to those who actually had the strength to do what had to be done. I did not even have the honor of dying at the hand of a true Falmer. You sent a child of Molag Bal and a half-breed Altmer exile to put me down. A hero of the Nords, those people that put our proud race to the sword. Your shame is far greater than mine."

"I couldn't abandon my duty." Gelebor's words sounded pathetic, even to himself. "If I'd fallen fighting my way to the Inner Sanctum, no one would have remained to guard the wayshrines."

"And who guards them now, hmm? The Betrayed have torn the Vale from your grasp, my poor sweet foolish brother. You failed in the only worthy task that will ever be given to you, and you failed me. Just as you're failing the child of Veloth you travel with presently."

"Please, stop this." He whimpered like a child. "You are not my brother. He was kind. He loved me. Leave me to die in peace." *Maybe I'll finally see my true sibling, again. Will Auriel accept me, after all I've done?*

"Oh, yes." The corners of Vyrthur's mouth turned upward. The cruel smile looked strange on one so young. His face was aglow from a pale flame that knew no source. "Soon Nadene Othryn will discover how weak you are, and she will leave you as we all have. You will lose her, and you will lose the Prince of Dusk and Dawn, she who promised you the impossible. Twilight will fall, and blood will spill. Never again will you look on the face of a Snow Elf. Only when you realize the full extent of your failure will you be permitted to die."

"You lie. No one can know the future, for certain." Gelebor could hear the desperation in his own voice. "Not even Azura." *That's what Nadene said, on the beach. That's what I'm holding on to.*

"Azura?" A darkness passed over Vyrthur's countenance. "She, too, will reap what she has sown. Before the sun rises again, the fate of Vvardenfell will be sealed in ash and blood. None will escape my judgement. Time to wake up, son of Auriel. Fire and war await you."

Gelebor awoke with a scream in a tangle of sheets, in a small room with a ceiling he recognized not. A hand with an ironclad grip closed around his flailing wrist, and a tingling spell washed over his skin. His arms and legs went limp and he collapsed on to the bed. His head spun like a Dwemer contraption.

"Listen. This is the last time I'm going to say this." Neloath stood over him, a harried expression on his face. "If you wake up thrashing about like that one more time, I will paralyze you for a day instead of a minute. Your friends will be forced to carry you around like some sort of deficient flesh atronach. Lie there like a helpless idiot if you understand."

He had little choice but to obey. Neloath left the room, muttering curses under his breath. The ceiling was a mottled shade of brown, with curious spots of blackness on the periphery. *Mushroom. I'm in a Telvanni tower.* Memories rushed in to his mind, and he was seized with terror. It turned out to be a good thing, after all, that Neloath had paralyzed him. *Nadene*, he wanted to scream, *Nadene!* An ocean of blood had covered her. No one could lose that much and keep on living. Small tears ran down his motionless face. *Vyrthur was right. This is all my doing.*

Soft footsteps, from the direction Neloath had left. A small gray face entered his vision. *The Ashlander child. Eldrus, who lost his mother. His grandmother is Sakani, she who receives visions from Azura and pushes the Nerevarine to lead her tribe into battle.* How disappointed the wise woman would be to learn Nadene had perished in this ruined town, without felling a single one of the cultists.

"It's okay. She's not dead," Eldrus said quietly, as if he had been listening in to his thoughts. He gently wiped the wetness from Gelebor's cheeks with a clean square of cloth. "Just hurt. Sleeping in the other room. I helped the wizard take care of her, on account of my grandmother taught me some things about healing. Do you want some tea?"

Sensation was gradually returning to his body. He nodded slightly. "Where...Kharjo?"

"He's been pacing around the tower for hours and hours. He was really worried about you two. He's driving Neloath mad. Or, madder than he was to begin with, at least."

"Neloath. Treating us kindly?"

"He's okay. Kind of reminds me of my grandmother." The boy's smile fell from his face. "She wasn't always like that, y'know. One day she just changed."

What a strange thing to say. Gelebor sat up in bed as Eldrus left to fetch the tea. This tower was darker than Tel Mithryn or Nadene's home had been; there was little need of windows, when all

you would see through them was Vvardenfell. He wanted to go to Nadene's side as soon as possible, but his legs didn't feel up to walking yet. Crawling to her room probably wouldn't endear him to Neloth, either. Sacks of yam flour took up a whole wall of his chambers, and the other side was cluttered with shelves of alchemical ingredients and baskets full of empty soul gems. The air smelled sharply of power, of rising energy. *What is Neloth up to, in this town of petrified Dunmer?*

When Eldrus returned with a steaming cup of tea, Kharjo came with him. The Khajiit sat down on the edge of the bed and studied Gelebor's face intensely. He began to feel a bit examined as he sipped from his cup.

"Is the bruise on my head so distasteful to look upon?" Gelebor asked.

"Hmm. No. Khajiit is watching for something else. Your night was not restful, Knight-Paladin. Our loathsome host had to paralyze you so often, I feared you might never return to wakeful sanity. Do you feel well, now?"

"As well as could be expected."

"You have not been...visited, by anyone? Or anything?" Kharjo's whiskers twitched. "This one remembers darkly the tale Erandur told us, of Balmora's dreamers. We are so close to the end, now. It would not astonish Khajiit to see Namira attack us in our sleep, especially knowing now that her followers wield the Staff of Corruption."

Gelebor's mind went to Vyrthur, and he almost began to speak. But something held his tongue. Shame, perhaps. *It's no business of his, what happened between my brother and I. It has nothing to do with Namira.* "No. If I had any visions, I don't recall them. The last thing I remember is watching Neloth step into the doorway of the little house. Please, tell me. How is Nadene?"

"What you said a minute ago. 'As well as could be expected.' That is true for her too, I think." Kharjo traced circles on the bedsheet with one of his claws, a troubled look on his face. "Master Neloth may be the most distasteful elf this one has ever had the misfortune to encounter, but he treated Nadene with care and respect." He inclined his head towards Eldrus. "And our young friend did wonderful work, as well." The boy looked down, blushing.

He set down the cup of tea. "So tell me why you look as if she's died."

"The cleaver the cultist Hogni used was enchanted. Neloth told us a scar made with such a weapon could not be healed. The bandages can be taken off, now, but our dear friend bears the mark of battle. To speak plainly...Nadene has lost her right eye. It is fortunate she did not lose her life with it, but I do not know if she will see it that way."

Gelebor's heart fell. "You do not know? So she hasn't woken up, yet?"

Before Kharjo could finish shaking his head, Gelebor was up out of the bed and stumbling towards the door. He barely registered the sight of the Snow Prince's armor, lying in a pile in the corner of the room. *I have to see her. I have to apologize.* The world seemed remarkably more unsteady than he'd left it. He nearly knocked over Eldrus before Kharjo grabbed his shoulder with a firm hand and steadied him.

"Be careful," Kharjo said. "And when you speak, keep doors shut and voices low. The cultist we have captured is being kept in the lower level, securely bound."

What? He's alive? But there was no time to ponder on that, now. Gelebor nodded wearily and let Kharjo guide him out of the room. The center of the central chamber was an empty circular space.

He could see an upper level, through the railing, and another floor below them. *No levitation platforms, here*, Gelebor noted distantly. He supposed Neloth had been forced to levitate them all up here, with Nadene incapacitated. They passed several other rooms before coming upon one with a securely latched door. Kharjo opened the portal and released his hold on Gelebor.

"You're not coming in?" He asked.

"Khajiit thinks it best that you speak alone, first." Kharjo patted his shoulder. "I'm not sure if you wanted me to know, but it has become hard to miss the affection between you and the Nerevarine. I'm happy for the both of you, and I hope you survive this island so that you can go have a blissful life in a place where ash does not rain from the sky and people do not eat each other."

Gelebor blinked, unsure how to respond. "Thank you for saying so, Kharjo. Wherever we end up, you're welcome to join us."

"No thanks are needed. I would not have made it here without my beloved elven companions. I can feel the hour of reckoning coming, Knight-Paladin. The witch priestess is close. When my blade reaches her heart, I will have vengeance for Zaynabi and my kittens. Then I can rest at last."

Before Gelebor could reply, Kharjo gently pushed him into Nadene's room and closed the door.

He swallowed and turned to Nadene's bed. This room was clearly a makeshift library, of sorts. Where pieces of wheat and blisterwort had filled the shelves in his own sick quarters, dusty tomes and old scrolls took their place in these chambers. His love lay face up on top of her sheets. White bandages covered half her head. The expression on her face was one of fear, loss, pain. She looked so young. *What have I done to this woman, who was so fierce and invincible? Who rose up a forest on Solstheim to cover the scars of a cataclysm? My love has unmade her.* It was just as Nadene had said, after rescuing him from the cannibal Sanyon on that island cove. *'You've made me weak, Gelebor.'* She had to have known she'd end up like this. *Why persist?* It was beyond his understanding.

Nadene stirred. Her uncovered eye blinked, and she began to breathe rapidly. Gelebor hastened to her side, pouring a cup of water from the pitcher next to her bed. A difficult task, with shaking hands.

"You're alright," he whispered. "You're in Neloth's tower."

Her eye widened. She tried to speak, but all that came out was a hollow croak. Gelebor gently held the cup of water to her lips and helped her drink, like a vale sabre cat feeding one of its young. After she finished, she sat up on the bed, reaching for the bandages on her face.

"Hold on a moment, dear. There happens to be..." *Whatever gods may be listening, please give me strength.* He could hardly swallow, past the lump in his throat. "There's something you need to know."

Her hands paused in the air. She studied his face, the small tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

"It's gone, isn't it?" There was resignation in her tone, and defeat. He'd never heard such things in her voice before. She did not cry; it was possible she had no more tears left to weep. "The n'wah cut out my eye."

"I'm so sorry." It was all he could think to say. *I can't make this about my failure. It wouldn't be right.* He would know, in the solitude of his own thoughts, the reason why the woman he loved

had ended up like this. Not-Vyrthur's words echoed inside his head. *Soon Nadene Othryn will discover how weak you are, and she will leave you as we all have.*

"Not your fault." Nadene licked her lips. She stared past his shoulder, her mind gone someplace he could not follow. "I never should have been fighting that close. But damn. Spellbreaker? I've heard rumors of such a shield...just my fucking luck that my first encounter with it leaves me half-blind."

"Neloth did all he could." Gelebor fell to his knees, his eyes cast downward. "Eldrus, too. The weapon was enchanted."

"That explains why it hurt so much. Must have been an agony charm, or some similar rune of Daedric origin. We should have figured they'd be collecting artifacts from Oblivion, after Erandur told us about the Vaermina staff." She sighed. He could tell she was talking so she wouldn't have to think about what happened. "Stand up, endling. We're both alive. That's all that matters."

"Yes," he replied, struggling to his feet.

"Are you alright?" Nadene smiled weakly. "Your head looks like an angry eggplant. I forgot how easily that pale skin of yours bruises."

She's been maimed, and still asks how I'm doing. It was all he could do not to collapse.

"I'm fine. Just a little dizzy."

"And the others?"

He glanced towards the door. "No one else is hurt. Kharjo was apparently very concerned as to how we were faring, to Neloth's annoyance. Eldrus has proven himself to be quite a capable young healer. And..."

She raised her eyebrow. "And?"

"The cultist. Hogni." Gelebor bit the inside of his cheek. "He survived our encounter, barely. Neloth is keeping him secured on the first level of the tower."

"Truly?"

He nodded.

"Good." Nadene leaned back against her pillow. "I'm glad you didn't kill him. Now we have a bargaining chip that might catch Eola's attention. Not to mention a powerful shield that will come in handy if we're forced to attack Red Mountain."

He breathed an internal sigh of relief. A small part of Gelebor had expected her to order him to finish what he'd started; to go down and kill their prisoner in cold blood. The terrifying thing was, he was fairly certain he wouldn't have been able to refuse her. *Little by little, I'm turning into the monster Azura wants me to be.* It had felt so right, beating the life out of the cannibal. The Nord had taken a part of Nadene away from her forever. Such a wretched creature did not deserve to live, surely.

Neloth entered the room without so much as a knock. Kharjo and Eldrus followed after him. The latter two moved to stand around Nadene's bed, looking down at her wearing identical expressions of worry. The master wizard stood a cautious distance from them all, his arms crossed. Gelebor hadn't known Neloth long enough to know if the sour look on his face was for them, or if he was just generally an unhappy mer.

"You should be aware," Neloth spoke, "if you were not the Nerevarine, I'd have tossed you outside to fend for yourself. Consider it a mark of my respect that I let you and your unwashed companions stay in my tower."

"How'd you know?" Nadene sat up straighter. "That I am who I am. I misplaced Moon-and-Star a little while ago."

"Must you insult my intelligence by having me explain the obvious? Fine. My suspicions were aroused when the wound opened by that filthy cleaver showed no signs of festering. While you healed, I studied a sample of your blood. Either you are Tamriel's oldest and most miraculously fortunate corpus victim, or the Nerevarine. Considering I do not believe in miracles, there was only one sensible conclusion."

"Well, you're right, I guess. Congratulations."

He turned away from them, appearing to study a book on the shelf. "Let's dispense with the sobriquets, in any case. We will not speak long. Who helped you reach Vvardenfell? I thought the Redoran, at first, but they're too incompetent to have responded so quickly to this little crisis."

"Divayth Fyr."

Neloth's hands tightened into fists. "I should have suspected. I knew it would take more than a rogue moon falling on Vvardenfell to excise that particular thorn in my side. My recent research into the Black Books of Hermaeous Mora has no doubt attracted his attention. Well, you can tell Fyr he doesn't have a monopoly on the field of extra-planar travel! If he's been skulking about Tel Mithryn, searching for my relics, he'll be sorely disappointed. I left nothing there for his envious talons to seize upon."

"Um." Nadene took a moment to collect her breath. *This wizard makes simple conversation an exhausting event.* "I don't know anything about your feud with Divayth, or any special books."

"Sure, sure." His tone was mocking. "Of course he swore you all to vows of secrecy. Well, no matter. Soon I will return from this waste of an expedition, and my work on Solstheim will continue. The Black Books will be my breakthrough, of course. Fiddling around with heart stones has brought me nothing but misery. Do you know how long it takes to train a competent Telvanni researcher? Let alone almost a hundred? Bah. Such a squander of time and magicka. Now I have a town filled with soulless husks, and hardly a single publishable treatise to show for the trouble."

"Soulless husks, you say? Doesn't seem like Namira. I figured her followers were more into the meat surrounding the soul, not the other way around. In Balmora, they used fury potions to turn the city against itself."

Neloth made a thoughtful sound. "Oh, I'm sure the moron they sent here intended to do much the same. He was certainly a much better cook than he was an alchemist. My spellwright handles the employment of all the riff raff, of course, but I had the final word. I never met this chef, but his credentials were impressive, and the meals he prepared were simply divine."

Kharjo chuckled darkly. "Surely it did not escape the wise elf's attention that his new cook was a Nord?"

"As a matter of fact," Neloth replied, glaring, "my spellwright informed me our new addition insisted on wearing a chitin helmet at all times, for some reason he would not divulge."

"Not suspicious at all," Nadene commented.

"I'm not in the business of caring what the mer who prepares my meals does with his face. This Hogni Red-Arm was the finest chef I've ever had in my employ. Everything was going splendidly up until the day of the botched poisoning. After we broke our fast, I began to notice that everyone around me was slowing down. Not a remarkable occurrence, so I continued on with my work. By nightfall it was clear that something had gone amiss. My assistants had reached unacceptable levels of lethargy. Only my spellwright, the chef himself, and I were left unaffected. I suppose he didn't want to take any chances on us."

Gelebor asked, "Your spellwright. Where is he now?"

"I sent *her* to confront the cultist." Neloth glanced at a timepiece on one of the shelves. "That was approximately two days ago. I don't suppose she could have anticipated he would be wielding an artifact as powerful as Spellbreaker. Oh, well. She was the one who hired the slimy wretch."

A sudden tide of anger rose in Gelebor. "You could have provided us warning, or fought Hogni yourself. I thought you were supposed to be one of the most powerful wizards of the Telvanni. Nadene would still have both her eyes, were you not such a coward."

"Gelebor, it's no use getting upset at him," she said. "He's always been this way."

"A coward, am I?" Neloth's lip curled. "I expected better from the last living member of the Falmer race. I'm sure Fyr was simply fascinated with you, but I am hardly impressed. I've lived for thousands of years, child. I possess centuries of knowledge in fields of study you've never even conceived of. I survived the Sixth House, the Red Year, the return of the First Dragonborn. You think I would risk my life in a scrap with some halfwit from a minor cult of Namira? If you had any sense, you'd have never come to this waste of an island. I've just finished rebuilding the arcane conduit to Port Telvannis, and I intend to leave Vvardenfell as soon as possible."

"You could have departed already," Kharjo pointed out. "The ships floating in your dock appear to be seaworthy."

"I beg your pardon. Have you mistaken me for a gondolier? The day I'm forced to pick up a barnacle-encrusted oar is the day I know it's time to abandon this cursed plane of existence for good."

"Wait," Nadene said, trying to rise. "You can't just leave. We need your help to fight Namira."

He rolled his eyes. "That's just too bad for you. I've already lost years of progress to this mess. Not to mention the heart stones I'd been collecting for decades."

"They took your heart stones? Whatever for?"

"I do not know, I do not care." Neloth turned to leave. "The cultist downstairs is your problem to deal with. I don't suppose I can stop you from lingering in my tower, but I'd advise you all not to touch anything that looks dangerous if you value your lives. Staying too long is also inadvisable. No doubt other Telvanni will show up someday soon, to pick at the bones of my failure. They may not be as fond of you as I have been."

Nadene leapt from the bed and staggered towards Neloth. He paused in the doorway, a pained look on his face, and waited impatiently. Gelebor followed a step behind Nadene, in case she should suddenly collapse. When she was close enough, she stood on her tiptoes and whispered something in Neloth's ear.

"No," he replied vehemently, after she'd finished. "That is insanity, plain and simple. Insanity and

suicide."

"Please." Nadene's voice held a desperation utterly alien to Gelebor. "I know it's a long shot, but I'm going to need you. Just a few short hours, Neloth. You said you held respect for the Nerevarine. I know how sparing you are with your regard. I saved Morrowind from the Sixth House, from the Blight. I beg of you. Give me the benefit of the doubt."

He glared at her for a long minute, the muscles in his cheeks moving up and down. Finally he let out a beleaguered sigh.

"Three curses. I knew this island would be the death of me." He put a hand to his chest, and teleported away in a rush of charged air. Nadene pitched forward, steadying herself on the door. Gelebor put a hand on her shoulder.

"Maybe you should take a breath," he suggested. "Rest for a few minutes. You've been grievously wounded."

She turned the unbandaged part of her face towards him. With his body blocking the way, the others couldn't see her shields falling away. For a long moment Nadene looked up into his eyes; and he knew it was her, not the Nerevarine, that he was beholding. She looked to be on the verge of total collapse, like a hound that had been beaten every day of its miserable life.

"Just a little while longer," Nadene said. "We just have to be strong for a little while longer. The Nerevarine and the Knight-Paladin. After Red Mountain, we can rest."

He nodded slowly, fearful of the meaning behind her words. "Neloth. What did you say to him? What did he agree to?"

"I asked him to deliver a message to Port Telvannis. But it's nothing that will matter if we don't survive the day. Namira's champion is coming. For us, and for her lost little cannibal."

Kharjo stepped forward, his fangs bared. "Tell us what to do, Nerevarine. This Khajiit's sword is yours."

Nadene grimaced. "First of all, I need to get these fucking rags off of my head. We can't afford to show a shred of weakness."

"I'll help you," Gelebor said, and followed her out.

They found the helmet in a small storage space tucked away on the first level. There were other relics of old Vvardenfell present: colorful tubers and eggs preserved in jars of amber solution, rusted weapons and pieces of armor in styles utterly unfamiliar to Gelebor, and paintings of places that had been lost to time centuries ago. He was looking at an image depicting a city of tiered cantons in the sea, a massive dark rock positioned above them, when Nadene stood up from her rummaging with the gleaming shape in her hands. The helmet portrayed the face of a mer, his dour expression permanently captured in the gold cast. Jagged lines, the impressions of scars, covered the face. A metallic plume of a similar shade ran across the top of the helmet. She passed her fingers through it, forcing out the months or years of dust.

"The Ordinators used to wear these," Nadene said wistfully. "If you saw one running towards you, it meant you were destined to rot in Vivec's floating prison. The Ministry of Truth. All for the crime of believing in the Nerevarine."

"I never asked," he replied carefully. "Why you killed Vivec."

"Many reasons. Some of which seem naive now, some of which were driven by base emotions. If you're asking if I knew what would happen...no, I did not. But even if I hadn't silenced Morrowind's warrior-poet, I had already destroyed the Heart of Lorkhan. His powers were waning. The Red Year was an inevitable consequence of defeating Dagoth Ur. Or at least, that's what I tell myself."

He moved to her side, and looked down at the mask. "This face seems very sad. To whom did it belong?"

"To me, of course." Nadene stroked her thumb across the metal. "To Indoril Nerevar. Coming back home, the long way 'round. I'm ready to take off the rags, now."

Gelebor delicately untucked one end of the bandages, and began to untwirl them from the side of her head like a long white scarf. All the while he kept one hand on her shoulder, holding her firm. Finally the last of the bandages fell away. He let them flutter to the ground, discarded. There was a mirror on the far side of the wall. Nadene lurched towards it like a prisoner bound for the gallows. *Auriel, Azura, please help us through this day. It's the least you could do, for all we've given.*

"Doesn't look as bad as I thought it would," she said miserably. Her right eye was gone, replaced by a small bundle of scar tissue. An angry red line cut across it, the mark of the cleaver, running from the edge of her scalp to the end of her chin. Gelebor squeezed her shoulder. "I probably won't scare any children."

"The scar will fade," he said reassuringly. "And you're right. You're still beautiful. There's no need to wear the mask."

Her gaze hardened. "You're kind, but our enemy will try to exploit any vulnerabilities they can find. We don't even know what they know about us yet. I can't afford to give them an opening. Hand me the helmet."

Gelebor sighed and handed her the Indoril helm. *For a little while longer, that's all. Then we can rest.* She slid the golden head over her own, and it fit snugly into the gorget of her glass armor.

"Can you see the eye?" Nadene turned to face him. "Or lack thereof."

He studied her altered features. Nerevar had been a mer of harsh, strong features, and Gelebor could see little sign of the woman behind the mask that he loved so dearly. Only a pair of small black openings indicated the spaces she was meant to see out of, and he could discern nothing from their depths.

"No. How well can you see, wearing that thing?"

"The better question would be, how well can I see with one fucking time to answer either of those."

Eldrus burst into the room, breathing heavily. "Someone's coming down the mountain, riding a guar!"

"It's time." The boy looked up at Nadene, his mouth agape. *She must seem more a god than ever, now.* "I want everyone outside. Tell Kharjo to bring our prisoner. Gelebor, go put on your armor. And make sure your mace is ready."

He nodded, already following Eldrus, but at the doorway he hesitated.

The mask turned towards him. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry you were hurt. I love you."

Behind Nerevar's face, he imagined he could see Nadene smiling sadly, as she always did when he spoke those words. "I love you, too. Now go on, and hurry. We don't want to keep Namira waiting."

At least in one respect, the gods were looking out for them. The sky outside was blue for a change, and the air was free of choking ash. That meant Gelebor could see well the slender Breton woman waiting for them before Neloth's tower, blonde of hair and short of height. *This is the one who has caused me such misery?* For some reason he'd expected her to be covered in war paint, like some sort of tribal Bosmer, but her face was clear and bright save for the sightless pit of her right eye. It made Gelebor's skin crawl just to look at it. Eola wore simple leather armor; her only weapon, a long dagger strapped to her thigh. *The blade that crippled our friend Erandur.* She stood beside a bone-white guar, her remaining eye turned reverently towards the tower.

"I have been waiting a long time to meet you, Knight-Paladin Gelebor." Her voice was warm and passionate, like cinnamon and warmed saltrice. It was little wonder how she had become the leader of her cult. "Return to Red Mountain by my side, and all of your mortal pains will come to a glorious end."

"No one is going anywhere with you," Nadene interrupted coldly. She stood the closest to Eola, her bow at the ready.. Gelebor was on her right, his own weapon drawn, and Kharjo waited farther back, standing over Hogni.

"You are the Nerevarine." Eola's words seemed less a question than a statement. "You killed some of my favorite people."

"They tried to take Gelebor from us. I'll gladly kill you, as well, if you take another step closer to him."

Eola giggled, a queer sound that sent shivers down Gelebor's spine. "The prophecy must be fulfilled. I have no personal vendetta against you, Nerevarine. We are both strong women trying to make our way through this world of death. Let Gelebor come with us, and I promise no harm will come to Habisunilu."

Nadene was quiet for a moment. Gelebor could almost hear her mind racing, underneath her helmet.

"We have your man," she finally said, gesturing to Hogni. The cannibal's face was even more of a ruin than it had been, but the Nord was conscious, if not particularly conversational. "Let us make a trade. One of yours, for one of ours. Give me Habi, and we can continue talking from there."

Eola closed her eye and turned her face to the sky. Her mouth split into a wide grin. "Oh, but you are more desperate than I thought. Hogni Red-Arm, the least of my coven, a brute and an oaf, for my most valuable prisoner? The child that is presently keeping you from raining down ruin on Red Mountain? Do not treat me like a fool. Hogni has already completed his task here in the Telvanni properties. Though I would have preferred to have turned some of the wizards to Namira's side, they have been removed from the equation nonetheless. I have no use for them, or for him."

"No!" Hogni leapt to his feet, faster than wind, and ran towards Eola. Kharjo's sword passed through the air just a second too late. Nadene's arrow was no more fortunate. Her aim was off, and the projectile went flying through the air over the two cultists.

"Fuck!"

Hogni collapsed at Eola's feet, pawing at her legs.

"He climbs on to that guar, and I'll kill the both of you," Nadene snarled.

"If I do not return to the citadel by nightfall, my beloved Lisbet has orders to butcher Habisinulu like an ill piglet," Eola replied harshly. She seized Hogni by the front of his clothes and drew him upward, his feet dragging on the ground. As they watched in horror, her teeth closed around his bruised throat. Hogni shuddered and gasped. Blood exploded over Eola's chin and splashed down her chest. In a minute Hogni had stopped moving save for the occasional agonal twitch, but Eola continued tearing and chewing like a wolf with its snout buried in the neck of a fresh kill. Finally it was done. She let the corpse fall from her arms and land in the red ash. Hogni was curled up like a squashed insect.

"Let me put down this beast," Kharjo said, his eyes filled with pain. "I beg of you, Nerevarine. She must not be allowed to continue in this way."

"Who in the void are you?" Eola asked, wiping her chin. "I thought I'd captured the only Khajiit on Vvardenfell."

"My name is Kharjo. Remember it well, because it is I that will put you in the ground to rot for an eternity. You...murdered my family, consumed their remains. I watched you feast in the moons' light, and I've followed you across Tamriel to find my vengeance."

Eola raised her brow, evidently unimpressed. "I don't have time for you. You already know what will befall the Ashlander girl if I'm stricken down. Can you carry that life on your conscience, cat? Will you be able to look your friends in their faces?"

"Please, Kharjo," Nadene spoke. "Now is not the time."

Kharjo returned to his spot behind her, but his eyes did not leave Eola. Gelebor's heart beat like a drum. *This is not at all going like we planned.* Their only leverage was now lying dead at their enemy's feet.

"I do not know what this waste of flesh may have told you," Eola said, kneeling down to take something from the pack her guar was wearing. "But the time of secrets have passed. You know what I desire. You know what you have to do, if you ever want to see your little elf alive again, or any of the others we've taken. Here is the map to our hidden citadel in the mountain." She tossed a scroll towards them. It landed near Gelebor, and he hastily picked it up.

"Why are you giving us this?" Nadene asked, the muscles in her shoulders tightening.

"So the meal of prophecy knows where to go," Eola replied sweetly. "I have no desire to send Namira's faithful into bloody combat with your tribal allies. We would defeat you, eventually, but I have thought up a better way for everyone. Every turn of the sun that passes, we will send three souls to the Scuttling Void. This will continue until Gelebor has surrendered to Namira."

"Why?" Gelebor spoke up, for the first time in the conversation. "Why are you doing this?"

She looked away before replying, perhaps pondering her response. After a little while, she spoke again. "In my early years, a savage servant of Namira introduced me to a tidbit of knowledge I've been turning over in my head ever since. He ate my mother and father, but then I stabbed him in the back with a letter opener when he came down into the potato cellar to find me. He bled out on the stones. And then I couldn't open the door. Do you understand? My legs were too short. I couldn't

reach the lock at the top."

Gelebor swallowed, and rubbed the sweat from his forehead. *I think I already regret asking.*

"It was a poor growing season. There were no potatoes in the potato cellar, but there was the man. Dead, reasonably clean, reasonably fresh. It was in the depths of my childhood home that I discovered how hungry a little girl can truly get. And what of all those rules and laws, made up by the Jarl or the Empire or the gods themselves? Nothing but lines on paper, I learned, once your body begins to eat itself to stay alive. Pretty words that make people feel better about inhabiting this monstrous world. In that cellar I found my faith, when my mouth filled with the blood and bile of my fellow man. I tasted power and truth."

Nadene shook her head. "You're mad. Well and truly insane. I don't know how I ever thought we could negotiate with a depraved follower of a cannibal god. What was I thinking? What have you done to me?" There was an edge to her words Gelebor didn't care for. *If this continues, she may lose herself.*

"Let me put it in a way a local would understand." Eola smiled, but there was no warmth in her face this time. She mounted her guar. "In this world, you are either the scathecrow or the scythe. And I will *not* end up on someone else's feasting table. Gelebor?"

"Yes?" His voice was faint.

"You have the map. You've heard my words. If we do not see you by sundown, you will all see the result of your futile obstinance. One snow elf, or three innocent souls. Namira will have her due either way."

Nadene stepped forward, her finger pointed like a weapon. "If you hurt Habi, I will wipe your cult from the face of Nirn. If you're familiar with the history of that mountain you're hiding beneath like kwama foragers, you know it wouldn't be the first time. And the Sixth House never took anyone I loved from me. I will make certain no trace of your goddess remains in existence, and when I'm done I will lead an army of Redoran into Oblivion to besiege the Scuttling Void itself. Do not think I would pass up the chance to kill you twice, bitch."

Eola just grinned and turned her guar away. Soon she was a receding shape on the horizon, ash kicking up in her wake.

Gelebor found himself on his knees, staring down at the ground. The strength to stand had left him all at once, like it was he and not Hogni who had been brutalized and consumed. The gentle wind tugged at his cloak, and grains of ash pattered against his armor like drops of rain, but they seemed to belong to another world entirely.

"We need to get out of here," Nadene said, eventually, desperately. Now that Eola was gone, all her spirit and fury had fled. "I need to talk to Azura. Gelebor, *please*. I can't do this without you. I can't even aim a fucking arrow."

He nodded, slowly.

She pulled Gelebor to his feet and whistled for Eldrus to come out of the tower with Spellbreaker. Before too long the ghost city of the Telvanni was behind them, and they were trudging through the ash wastes, bound for the Urshilaku. No words were spoken, but a cold certainty was cementing in Gelebor's heart. The sun was directly above them. *Midday, already.* Even with the fair weather, they'd barely reach the village before the time of Eola's first ultimatum. The map to Namira's citadel was secured in the pocket of his cloak. He fingered the edges of the scroll, feeling

the rough hide. *Three innocent souls, against the life of a Snow Elf who has lived through eras.*
Every turn of the sun. Every turn of the sun. He grimaced and followed after Nadene, the memory
of Eola's cruel smile seared into his mind.

Fire and War, Part II

"Pity Dagoth Ur and the Sixth House. All they do, all they are is foul and evil, but they began in brightness and honor, and the cause of their fall was their loyal service to you, Lord Nerevar." - Peakstar

"We must answer Namira's threats with the wrath of Azura," Sakani said, the reflections of flames dancing in her wide crimson eyes. "The impotent Prince of repulsion has only words in her arsenal. Let us respond with action. Namira's familiar has foolishly provided a map to their fortress. Her domain is the shadows, but shadows wither and die in the light of dawn. Fall on Red Mountain with the might of the Urshilaku, with sharpened spears and blinding faith."

"I'm not throwing my granddaughter's life away," Nadene growled, her voice barely muffled by the helmet. They stood in the center of the village, amidst the gathered Ashlanders. "I'm sure you're looking forward to roaming Moonshadow for the rest of eternity, but nineteen years on Tamriel is no sort of lifetime. Habi deserves *more*."

Nineteen years. Gelebor had known Habisinulu was young, but the average lifespan of Dunmer and the long-lived beings he'd been associating with had blinded him to the total truth. Such a short span of time seemed like scarcely a season to him. There had been times during his vigil in the Vale that two decades had passed between heroes fighting their way to his wayshrine. In Gelebor's memory, his life had stopped when the Betrayed had pillaged the Forgotten Vale and only started again when he encountered Nadene in that Solstheim forest. In the time between those events, he'd just been going through the miserable cycles of life: eating when hungry, drinking when thirsty, fighting when others attacked him. His mind had served only as a time capsule for an extinct race. Truly, Habisinulu had probably lived more in her nineteen years than he had in millenia. *All the more reason for her to carry on living, while I go to my final rest.*

"We will heed your words, Nerevarine." Sakani bowed her head, but her sharp gaze didn't leave Nadene's covered face. There was a certain tension in the air, as the Ashlanders observed these proceedings. Gelebor sensed that if it came to choosing sides, many of them would be conflicted on who to follow. Their wise woman, who led them in this holy war against Namira, or the reincarnation of their greatest hero? He dearly hoped it would not come to bloodshed. Enough had been spilled already. "You are our greatest warrior. No attacks will be led without you at the vanguard."

"Good." Nadene turned her head, squinting at the setting sun with her remaining eye. The air was calm, but it would not last. "I'm going to the Cavern of the Incarnate, to confer with Azura."

A wave of enthused whispers ran through the Ashlanders, and even Sakani's eyes brightened in excitement. *Not every day when the venerated godkilling champion of your people goes to meet with your most celebrated god, I suppose.*

"When I return, we'll decide what our next step is." That seemed to serve as a notice of dismissal, and the gathered throngs dispersed swiftly to go about their duties. Gelebor went to Nadene, a grim certainty taking hold of him.

"I have to go," he said firmly.

"Go where?" She knelt down to rummage around in her pack. "Sorry, but I don't think you can come into the cavern with me."

"You know what I'm saying." Gelebor sighed. "I beg of you. Don't make this more difficult than it already is. They just want me, Nadene. If I go to them, Habisunuli will be safe."

"Yeah, I'm sure the insane cannibal priestess will keep her word." Nadene stood up and crossed her arms. "Don't be so naive. Eola was bluffing, trying to make you give yourself up without a fight. They won't dare hurt Habi, as long as I'm on the island poised to lead the Urshilaku against them. She's the only thing protecting the cult from total destruction."

"I can't take that chance. Don't you understand?" He didn't know how to make her see. "No one else needs to die for me. I'm simply not worth three lives. Or even one." Vyrthur's words came upon him again: *Soon Nadene Othryn will discover how weak you are, and she will leave you just as everyone else has.*

"That's not for you to decide. I'm calling the shots here. No one leaves the village without my permission."

Gelebor raised his brow. "You're just being silly, now. I'm not an Ashlander, or the descendant of someone you freed from the chains of slavery. We're equals, remember? So this is my choice. My life. If you truly love me, you'll respect that."

Suddenly her hands were clenched into fists, beating at his breastplate. He blinked down at her in surprise. Though a mask covered Nadene's face, he heard the tears in her words when she spoke.

"How could you say such things?" Nadene said weakly. "Of course I love you. I don't want anyone I love to die, you damn fool. Just let me try to take care of things."

Gelebor felt utterly helpless. He wrapped his arms around her. "How?"

"I don't know yet." It was strange, to look into Nerevar's golden face and feel such unbearable love. "Just...stay here, please. Until I return from the cavern. I'll know what to do, after I talk to Azura. Give me a chance. I'll beg, if you make me."

"No. It's alright." He rubbed her shoulders. "I'll wait. I'll go stay with Kharjo and Erandur in the guest yurt, okay? We'll play cards and wait for you to come back."

"Okay." Nadene stepped away, and the mask looked up at him. "Do you promise?"

The sun was falling beneath the mountain, and the shadows of the yurts around them grew longer. The time of Eola's first ultimatum was nearly upon them. Gelebor took a deep breath. "I promise. Now, hurry to your cavern. Dusk is almost gone."

Nadene nodded and took off at a run, heading deeper into the valley. Several Ashlanders stopped to watch her go, their expressions unreadable beneath their helmets of chitin and bonemold. *She looks more like them, now that she wears Nerevar's visage.* He watched until she passed from sight, his heart filled with dread. *Why does this feel so much like a final parting?*

Kharjo had not spoken since their encounter with Eola. Gelebor couldn't imagine the depths of his frustration. He had travelled across Tamriel to avenge his family, and he bore the scars of that long passage. Now he had looked his nemesis in the eye, shared words with her, and been forced to stay his blade. *Does he resent Nadene, for giving that order? Or does he resent me, for the prophecy that led the cultists here in the first place.* There was only madness to be found on the roads of suppositions and regret. Gelebor had learned that well during his lonely years in the Vale.

The guest yurt was empty, their meager possessions scattered across the kreshfibre floor. Gelebor wore his only cloak over the Snow Prince's armor, and his mace was fastened to his belt. Whatever

Nadene might think of Eola's threats, they had all seen the ruin Namira had wrought on the Telvanni, and Erandur's retelling of the Balmora massacre seemed even more gruesome. He would not be caught unprepared. Gelebor passed through the Urshilaku, apart from them even as he shared their air and walked in their footsteps. Scarcely before had he felt so alone. Mostly they ignored Gelebor, as if he was a harmless spirit floating above the ash.

"Hey outlander," A tall, thin Ashlander clad in chitin called out to him. The mer was sharpening the head of a spear; evidently, he was some manner of warrior. "You lost your way?"

"I'm looking for my friends." Gelebor stepped aside from the path, so as not to block the way.

"Maybe I can help you find them. Name's Niranil." He put aside the spear, took off his helmet and then clipped to his belt. The smiling Dunmer face that greeted Gelebor was mostly free of the roughness and wrinkles of his fellows. Long black hair fell past his pointed ears. "And yours?"

"I am called Gelebor."

"Fancy that. I've never met an Altmer, before."

"I am actually a Snow Elf." At this point, it seemed little use trying to hide what he was. "The last one, in fact." *Just your luck. You have met the last Snow Elf on his last day.*

"Boethiah take me. A proper Falmer! I've only heard stories of your people." Niranil's eyes were wide as he studied Gelebor's face. "Is there a special way you folk do your greetings? A fancy handshake, or some such?"

"Just a hello, is fine." Gelebor couldn't make himself smile, though the Ashlander's curiosity seemed well-intentioned. "Pardon me for asking, but Niranil doesn't seem like a Velothi name."

"Probably cause it isn't." Niranil inclined his head. "A lot of us here came from Balmora, over the years. Heard tales of the last Ashlanders living out near the northern coast. Most who leave the city don't make it to the village. Those that do, sure aren't in any hurry to make the journey back. I left with my brother and father right 'round my thirtieth year."

"Are they around here someplace?" Gelebor glanced around. Niranil stood next to an empty pen, seemingly meant to hold livestock of some sort.

Niranil shook his head. "Brother was taken around the ruins of Gnisis, on our way here. B'veking ashspawn rose all around us, out of nowhere. He's with the ancestors, now."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He shrugged. "Berath knew the risks when we left Balmora."

A question nagged at Gelebor. "Why leave the city at all? I haven't spent long on Vvardenfell, but it seems a dreadfully hostile place. It's impressive how you Ashlanders have etched out an existence here, but I'd much prefer the protection of high walls and a trained guard force."

"Aye," Niranil said, "I was a lieutenant in the Redoran Guard for ten years. 'Twas no easy thing to leave that life behind. But living here with Veloth's people, I've found something Balmora could never provide. We live off the ash, like our grandfathers did. We hunt our own food, instead of buying it off some fetcher who sailed from Blacklight. In the noise of the city, a Dunmer is deaf to the voices of his ancestors and gods. But in this valley Azura's voice is as strong as ebony. Elves living in big cities and depending on pampered priests to tell them what to do, well, that's how Vvardenfell ended up this way. The Ashlanders were *right*. That's why I'm here, Gelebor."

"I'm not sure I understand," Gelebor admitted. He saw Kharjo past the mer's shoulder, carrying an orange-robed figure in his arms. *There they are.*

"Don't expect you to. Not sure that any of it matters, now, since Balmora's gone. Village this size doesn't have enough younglings born to support itself. The Urshilaku have only survived this long from strays wandering in. And now with the Ashkhan and his sons, all dead or lost...don't know what we'll do after all this."

"I wish you all the luck in the world. I beg your pardon, but I've caught sight of my companions. I'll have to leave you now."

"My pardon is yours, serjo." Niranil shook his head, and returned to sharpening. "A Snow Elf, in the flesh. By Azura."

Gelebor stopped a few steps away, and turned back to the Ashlander. "I forgot to ask. What happened to your father?"

Niranil's face darkened. He held up his spear. "This is for him. Namira got into his head, turned him into a monster. When we go up the mountain, I suppose I'll have to put Toram down. There's a sickness in my sire now that can't ever be cured."

More innocent lives, thrown in peril thanks to me. Gelebor had to physically shake his head to clear the troubling thoughts away. He followed Kharjo's trail back to the guest yurt, where he found them talking over cups of tea. The Khajiit was obviously agitated, his legs shifting restlessly.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Gelebor asked, hovering at the entrance flap.

Kharjo rose and brushed past him, with nary a word spoken. Before Gelebor could respond, he'd fallen in with the Ashlanders following the valley path.

"Come inside, my son." Erandur, at least, seemed happy to see him. "Have some tea. I fear that this may be the last quiet moment we have to enjoy."

He sat down in the spot Kharjo had left, his face turned down. His friend's reaction, and the sight of Erandur's injured legs, did nothing to soothe his worries. *Everything, all of this, is because of me. Why do I warrant such trouble?*

"I'm sure he told you that we met Eola," Gelebor said. "I don't think he took it well when Nadene asked him to let her go."

"No, I do not imagine he did." Erandur smiled wearily. "The path of revenge takes its toll in blood and pain. Kharjo has suffered greatly. I think he's looking for an ending to things, now that he's finally found his family's killer. The anger that has brought him this far is all he has left. After the priestess is dead, Kharjo will need to find something else to fill that void."

"And if he can't?"

"Then he will die. Or come close enough to death for the distinction to be negligible."

He remembered how they had found Kharjo in that Solstheim warehouse, starving and beaten. *Close enough to death, indeed.* It seemed silly to Gelebor, the thought that he might be able to provide his friend with the strength to carry on after completing his bloody mission. *I barely have enough life to keep myself going.*

"Nadene's gone to speak with Azura." Gelebor sipped his tea, barely tasting it. "She asked me to

wait for her to return, before I make a decision."

Erandur grimaced. "Ah, yes. Kharjo told me of Eola's offered deal. You give yourself willingly to Namira, or three innocent lives are taken. I was not surprised to hear of it. Bargains of blood are common among the Daedra and their worshippers."

"So what should I do?" He leaned forward, covering his face with his hands. "My mind feels like it's on fire. All these awful memories and thoughts, swirling about. I'm guilty because by staying here I'm killing three others, but if I leave I'll be betraying Kharjo and Nadene. And..." *The voices. Azura, and my dead brother.* But Gelebor couldn't bring himself to tell Erandur. This priest of Mara seemed to be the only being left on Vvardenfell who would listen to him.

"And?" Erandur asked gently.

"My brother." Gelebor looked up. "A long time ago, he became deathly ill. It made him cruel, spiteful. Evil. I was weak. I couldn't bring myself to face him. When the Dragonborn came to my wayshrine, I asked him to kill Vyrthur. And by the gods, he did it. I even rewarded him for the deed, like I was some royal heir who had hired a mercenary to spill the blood of his own kin. I could have saved my brother, but I killed him instead. That's why I deserve to die this night, and why no one else need die for me."

"The Dragonborn, you say?" Erandur mused. "Before he held that title, the mer named Jaxius Amaton provided me aid in ending Vaermina's influence over the people of Dawnstar. Countless years before, I wore the name Casimir, and I was a faithful servant of the Prince of Nightmares."

"You?" Gelebor's eyes widened. "A priest of Vaermina?"

"Difficult to believe now, I'm sure. Amaton helped me destroy the Staff of Corruption, at least for a time. But before I could reach the wicked artifact, I had to face the brothers I had left behind."

"Brothers..." He chewed the inside of his cheek. "The other priests. They attacked you, for leaving them."

"Hmm. Not entirely. They had been suffering the effects of a Daedric poison for many years, and their minds were irreparably damaged. Whatever their intentions, they stood in the way of Dawnstar's salvation. Amaton and I were forced to cut them down. Their final expressions, filled with confusion and betrayal, haunt my dreams to this day. Nevertheless, it was a necessary act. My brothers were only bringing pain to the world. I imagine Vyrthur was persisting in a similar state, when you asked the Dragonborn to take care of him?"

Gelebor nodded numbly. He wanted it so dearly to be true, the lesson Erandur was trying to impart. He wanted so badly to believe.

"My friend. Though you do not follow Lady Mara, her teachings can still be of use to you." Erandur leaned forward, his expression intense. "We are more than the sum of our failures. The love you feel in the present is more powerful than the pain you suffered so many years ago. Let the dead rest, Gelebor. I have seen how much you mean to Nadene. Do not become a ghost of her past. Be the light that brightens her life in the years to follow this dreadful day."

"I don't know-"

A distant scream echoed off the canyon walls. They both looked up sharply, and Gelebor's hand went to the handle of his mace.

Erandur frowned. "What was that?"

Nadene Othryn was alone with her god.

Getting inside the Cavern of the Incarnate had been simple enough. The great stone door had materialized under the light of the falling sun, and she'd managed to hold it open long enough to slip inside. The air inside was so stale that Nadene slipped off her mask after a few seconds. It seemed that no one had been here for centuries. *That wise woman praises Azura's name to the heavens. I would have expected her to leave offerings at the statue, at least. Lazy fetcher.*

The cave was much as she'd left it, some two hundred years ago. The enchanted door had kept the ruin of the Red Year from touching the hallowed shrine. Azura's statue, a grotesque construction at the end of the cavern, did seem more faded than Nadene recalled. The lines in her carved expression were being eaten away by time. The thought brought Nadene a grim satisfaction. As always, the crumbling remains of failed reincarnations surrounded the statue. *Erur-Dan. Peakstar. Hort-Led. Ane Taria.* The priceless artifacts their spirits had provided to aid in her journey were on Solstheim, safely secured in her underground was Taria's mace that she'd gifted to Gelebor, in a time that seemed so long ago now. A time her heart yearned for dearly.

But this was no time to dwell on the past. Soon enough the sun would fall below the horizon, and Nadene had no intention of being sealed inside the grim cavern until dawn. She had a promise to keep.

"Wake up," she ordered, kicking the base of the statue and sending up a cloud of dust. "Wake up, you miserable f'lah."

Azura offered no response.

"Oh, okay. Cute. You're talking to everyone else in Morrowind, it seems, invading their dreams and serving up bargains like a Blacklight antiques peddler. Do I have not anything you want? Are you busy talking to some guar herder in Necrom, or maybe a guardsman in Narsis? I'm sure you have a daily quota of souls you need to harvest."

Her fissured stone eyes seemed full of mockery, her open hands holding nothing but empty promises.

"By the gods, I was such a fool to ever follow your commands. You're no different from the rest of the Daedra." Nadene kicked the base again. Her foot was starting to throb. "Petty. Self-interested. Vengeful. *Evil.* Gelebor was getting better before you popped inside his head. We weren't happy, not yet, but we were nearly there. I guess you had to have your slice of the comberry pie, huh? I gave Vvardenfell, I gave *you*, everything I had. Everything I was. Now that I have something new, after all these years, you want that as well? Fuck you. Gelebor isn't going to die cleaning up your mess, and neither am I. Send the old woman if you want. At least you'll have company in Moonshadow. You're very similar, actually, in how you both make demands of me and provide nothing in return."

The cavern remained as silent and still as an ancestral tomb.

Nadene groaned in frustration. *Good for nothing n'wah.* She would have kicked the statue once more, but she was wary of chipping her glass boot. If Azura wasn't going to lend any aid, then she was going to need every scrap of armor she had in the battle to come. The seconds were counting down before dusk's end. There was no time. She put her helmet back on.

She hurried back to the door, preparing herself to pull the massive portal open and slip through before it could close on her. When the door was opened slightly, so that Nadene could see the last

rays of sunlight splashing against the valley walls outside, a long-forgotten voice spoke into her mind.

"Incarnate. I have been anticipating your arrival for some time. Are you so eager to flee my presence?"

"You had your chance." The voice, cold and ethereal, seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Sweat ran down her neck. *Damn, this door is heavy.* "I have to return to the village."

"Veloth's people will keep. Come, kneel before my statue, and hear my words. Much has transpired since last we spoke, Nerevarine. Fire and ruin across the land, and wars without end plague Morrowind's cursed people. Not all that was foreseen. Not all that could be changed by you or I alone."

"The mighty Azura admits she isn't infallible. Call the Black Horse Courier, it's a miracle." There was almost enough space for her to squeeze through, now. "Things to do, lady. You talk really slow."

"It was not I who whispered ill tidings to the Dunmer Sakani and Auriel's lost child. I have not spoken to any on Vvardenfell since the cataclysm."

Nadene's eye widened. "What?" She stumbled back, letting the door fall shut. Darkness filled the cavern. "That makes no sense."

Azura did not immediately reply. Nadene returned to the statue, watching her steps carefully in the darkness. The brief flash of sunset had reset her night vision, which was poor enough now already. After the Heart of Lorkhan had been destroyed and Nadene had staggered out of Dagoth Ur's crumbling citadel, the Goddess of Twilight had appeared to her in physical form: an avatar wearing the shape of a Dunmer spirit, her large eyes blank but somehow all-knowing, wearing a long blue dress sewn from a fabric not known to mortal minds. That was when Azura had spoken the lie that had destroyed everything.

"You said I was done with it all," Nadene whispered, as if she was fearful to let the words escape. "You said I achieved my destiny. That I was free."

Azura did not so much as step into view as float; from around the back of the statue she came, the same avatar from Nadene's memories. The dress was longer, this time, the sleeves so voluminous that her azure hands were hidden inside. A heavy hood was draped over her head, cloaking her face in shadow. The only light in the room came from the statue. A faint, almost ephemeral glow, like that of the nightshade that had grown in Nadene's tower garden so long ago.

"These were not lies. You have always been free to walk your own path, and the same is true for all the mortal champions I have chosen since the dawn of time. Without the choice to act, there is no meaning. You believed you were Nerevar Incarnate, and so you did become Nerevarine. You put an end to Lord Dagoth's madness and set the god's heart free, because you alone possessed the will to do so."

"You could have mentioned that it was all for nothing." Nadene suddenly wanted to punch the figure standing before her. Only the barest scraps of remaining self-preservation kept her hands by her sides. "That I was buying Morrowind six years of peace. The Oblivion Gates, the moon falling and destroying everything, the Argonians rushing in to tear at the remnants. *Why didn't you tell me?!*" She was overcome by a wave of dizziness, and had to lean on the statue just to stay on her feet. *I'm losing my fucking mind.*

Azura's expression was as devoid of emotion as the stone walls surrounding them. *"The tides of fate and time are uncertain, prone to change. As are the hearts of mortals. Mehrunes Dagon did not sunder the walls of reality alone. My agents are few in the heartland, and the doom-driven designs of Mankar Camoran and his followers were not known to me until the eleventh hour. Any action I might have taken against Dagon would only have brought further ruin to Morrowind. Of that, have no doubt. He is a vengeful beast. Baar Dau was a situation I thought to be handled. A pact had been forged with the Prince of Bargains. A wicked device, the Ingenium, fed by the souls of both the living and the dead, staying the rogue moon's fall indefinitely. The love between two Dunmer led to the failure of the device. What happened after was inevitable, and irreversible."*

"Oh, no. Don't lie to me. You knew Baar Dau was going to fall." There was a grim satisfaction in this, Nadene could not deny. "I've heard the stories, these past two centuries. You warned some of your priests away. Were the rest of us not worthy of surviving? The blood of thousands is on your hands."

"I foresaw that speaking of the forthcoming crisis to all my cursed children would only provoke chaos across Morrowind." If Azura was perturbed by her accusation, she did not show it. *"The young trampled in the streets, the old left to rot in their beds as the fires spread closer. Boats sinking into boiling waters, heavy with desperate mortal cargo. This would have only been a different manner of apocalypse. Prolonged, stinking of hopelessness and despair."*

"You could have warned me, at least." There was no use. Getting angry at Azura seemed about as effective as shouting at a wall. Her explanations made a frustrating amount of sense. "Did I not earn that?"

"I knew that if you wished to, you would survive Red Mountain's ruin." Was it Nadene's imagination, or was there a faint note of pride in her otherworldly voice? *"And if you were prepared to finally rest, I stood ready to welcome you to Moonshadow. But now here you stand, in the cavern in which you were born two hundred years past. The Moon-and-Star is not with you, but no matter. You know in your heart you can not shed fate so easily. As I said before, it was not I who visited your companion Gelebor and the leader of the last Ashlanders. Another speaks with my voice, turning these mortal souls towards deeds of darkness."*

"Who?" Nadene fell to her knees, looking up at the passionless avatar. "Namira? But...why would she set the Ashlanders and the Balmorans against each other, if she controls them both? Sakani could have had Gelebor sent up the mountain days ago."

"I do not sense the work of my depraved sister here. Namiira exists in the shadows, not the light of day. Hers is the form of corruption, gradual decay. Destroying cities, poisoning the minds of so many? Grand prophecies and the gathering of powerful artifacts? No. She is not so explicit or blundering. What is happening on Vvardenfell is not the work of your ancestors, or those who are not your ancestors."

"Then what n'wah is whispering in my Snow Elf's ear, damn it?" But even as Nadene said the words, she knew. A part of her had suspected all along. *The desecrated shrine on Solstheim, the voice speaking in the minds of the vulnerable and afraid...who else could it have been?*

"The signs of the truth litter the path that brought you here. You need only cast your mind towards the past. Watch, listen, and remember. All that has been shrouded in shadow now should be clear. The decision of what to do with this grim knowledge, Nerevarine, is once again in your hands. The fate of Morrowind, of all Tamriel, may hang in the balance."

"If Namira isn't here...is there any truth to the prophecy Eola speaks of?" Nadene's mind was buzzing with half-formed ideas, plots that would take days or weeks to set into place. *I have only*

hours. "Is Gelebor still in danger?"

"That is not for me to say. My vision of the future is clouded, indistinct. If you choose to return to Red Mountain, it will not be as a hero. This is no champion's quest. Of one aspect, I am certain: this is to be our last conversation. We will not speak again, incarnate."

"I understand." *A suicide mission.* Ever since arriving on this cursed island, Nadene had suspected it would come down to this. "I...I think I know what I have to do. Can you deliver a message for me? To another Prince?"

This gave Azura pause. The avatar's expression did not change, but there was a shifting in the cavern's atmosphere.

"Speak your message, and the name of the recipient."

Nadene told her.

This time, Azura was silent for what seemed like a long while. Nadene's knees were starting to hurt, pressed against the flat rock. Breathing the trapped air was leaving a foul taste in her mouth. *I wonder if anyone else has ever left a Daedric Prince speechless before. Shame Gelebor isn't around, he'd probably get a laugh out of it.*

"As a final token of my love, I will do this thing for you," Azura finally responded. *"But know that most who have put faith in this Lord have been left disappointed or dead. He is not an entity to be relied upon."*

"I know." Nadene rose, brushing the dust from her pants. "I'm hoping he can't resist my request. Well, this is goodbye for us, then. I'm guessing I haven't been your favorite champion, over the millenia."

"A mother does not loathe her child for petty transgressions."

"Used to sit on my porch with a bottle of wine, looking up at the sky and cursing your name."

"I was watching. I watched as your home was cloaked in flame, as it fell to the ground."

How had she been so blind? Sakani's worship of Azura, the fire and fury, the ultimatums and declarations of war and holy vengeance; these were not the tools of the goddess before her. Nor was she some murderess bargainer, to offer Gelebor his lost race in exchange for a cannibal bloodbath.

Azura watched, and Azura spoke softly to the people who most needed to listen. To those wise enough to carry out her will, in the way they best saw fit. It was little wonder that Moon-and-Star's enchantment was made to kill those who were not Nerevar. The power was in the hero, not the Prince.

"Goodbye." Nadene turned away. "I hope whoever you choose to speak to next is a better listener. Morrowind is going to need a true champion, when the Dominion comes knocking."

"Nadene Othryn?"

She glanced back over her shoulder. Azura was fading away, like moonlight at dawn. "Yes?"

"Fear not. Your tower will rise again."

The avatar vanished. Nadene took a deep breath and found a comfortable place to sit down. It was difficult to rest for long. The cavern door wasn't going to open until sunrise, but the burden of Nadene's discoveries sent her heart racing. *Hold on, Gelebor. Just hold on a little while longer. I'm coming as soon as I can.*

Thrice did the cultists of Namira attack during the night, and twice the Ashlanders pushed them back.

"You may look like an Altmer, sera, but you fight like a Velothi." Niranil grinned fiercely at Gelebor, his teeth stained with blood. His helmet had been lost in the fighting, and one of his chitin pauldrons was only hanging on by a few fibrous threads.

"Do not let your guard down." Gelebor wiped the sweat from his face, his eyes searching the darkness of the inner valley. They hadn't anticipated an attack from within; the cultists must have found an underground passage somewhere, leading to an opening deeper inside the Valley of the Winds. "We have been strangely fortunate."

He held the line with a dozen Ashlanders, spread to either side of him like the wings of a falcon. The tribals wore armor of hide, chitin, and bone; nothing that could compare to the Snow Prince's bulwark. Four cultists lay motionless in the ash, darkness spreading from their fallen forms. They were the ones who had been brave enough to test Gelebor's armor. His mace had made short work of them. Only one Ashlander had been killed. An older elf, who had possessed more courage than he had skill at arms. The others had moved his corpse to sit against the valley wall, behind the fighting line.

"The fetchers will take him for meat if we leave him out there," Niranil had grimly explained. "Promise you won't let that happen to me, snow elf."

Footsteps, from behind. Niranil raised his spear, but Gelebor shook his head. It was only a runner.

"Your Khajiit companion holds the mouth of the valley," the mer reported, between panting breaths. "Three of the enemy fallen. One of ours."

"Very well." Gelebor's sense of unease did not abate. Kharjo and his fighters had experienced fighting nearly as bloodless as their own. "They may be testing our strength, preparing for a final assault before the sun rises."

"Hmm. Tricky." Niranil thrummed his fingers on his spear shaft. "I don't like tricky."

"I've been in battles like this before. They're trying to draw us out, slip through the gaps in our defenses." *Time is a circle. If I don't look too closely, these cultists could almost be the Betrayed. Will I be able to hold the wayshrine, this time?*

Three innocent souls. He had foolishly assumed Eola had meant the souls of the prisoners kept under Red Mountain. Now two Ashlanders were dead, and they still could not rest easy. *One soul remains. By the gods, Nadene. Where are you?*

Dawn was an hour away, at best. Countless scratches and score marks covered Gelebor's breastplate, a testament to the raw ferocity of their foes. The cultists had aimed their weapons to maim and incapacitate, not to kill, but it seemed that they had given up their wish to acquire him entirely whole. *Good. I have no wish to be captured alive, by people such as these.*

Erandur had volunteered to come with the defenders, to heal their injured, but Gelebor had ordered him to stay behind in the yurt. The priest had acquiesced with little trouble. The same could not be

said for Eldrus, who wished to fight on the front lines and serve as Gelebor's squire.

There had been no time for niceties, with Namira's forces at the metaphorical gate. He had bellowed at the boy to return to the guest yurt and guard over Erandur. Eldrus' expression of hurt flashed through his mind. *No. Can't afford distractions, at this stage. They'll both be safer inside the village.*

Sakani was leading the noncombatants in a chants prayer around the central bonfire. From Gelebor's position deeper in the valley, the echoes of their chants sounded like the mournful songs of spirits long gone. He shivered.

From the darkness came a drumbeat.

"Here they come," Gelebor called out, and his men scrambled to readiness. "Do not let them pull you away from the line. We must be a chain unbroken!"

"The old ones are watching closely!" Niranil yelled, raising his spear. "This valley belongs to Azura, to the Velothi, to the Nerevarine! Let's cut out this rot from the land of our ancestors! For Resdaynia!"

"For Resdaynia!" The others took up the call, yelling and then screaming the words as the drumbeat came closer and began to shake the ground. From the darkness came the riders. In their arms they carried the murderous tools of a vanished race.

Three cultists mounted on guar rushed the line, heavy dwarven crossbows held high. The first bolt flew to Gelebor's left, tearing an Ashlander's head from his shoulders. The second went over Niranil, and the third took Gelebor in the stomach.

It was like being punched by a giant. His breath left him in one short gust, and the stars danced above him like distant swaying lanterns. He hit the ground at speed, rolling and tumbling in the gray. Blood and ash filled his mouth. He heard shouts, groans of pain, and clashing weapons, but they did not register as anything worth getting up for.

Finally the world stilled. For an eternity Gelebor looked up at the sky, lacking even the strength to gasp for air. *The stars. At least I get to see them, one last time.* Then he lost the capacity for thought, and resolved simply to go to his death with a pleasant image in his mind. A guar leapt over him, a momentary annoyance. Several figures rushed after it. Blackness crept in at the corners of his vision.

And then Eldrus screamed.

Gelebor returned to life all at once, rolling on to his hands and knees and vomiting blood on to the ash. His eyes blurred with every movement. *Eldrus. The boy.* Ashlanders passed him, carrying weapons. There was no time to waste. He picked up his mace, the weight an anchor keeping him in reality, and staggered towards the village.

There were no more screams, now. Was that a good sign? He couldn't remember. There were many shapes crowded around a yurt, the yurt Gelebor was bound for. They were beating a Dunmer covered in black markings, wearing the armor of a Redoran guard. He wore a sickly grin on his face, an expression of depraved satisfaction.

"Move," Gelebor mumbled, but the shapes did not hear or did not care. He passed through them like a ghost, past the elf with the bad face, and nearly fell into the yurt. A Khajiit was in there, kneeling beside a small shape covered in red. On the other side of the yurt was another shape, all

alone, lying on the floor in a wet pool. It called out to him.

"Erandur," Gelebor said, his mind clearing somewhat. He sat down next to his friend. "Are you hurt?"

"This will be the end, I believe." Erandur smiled, but blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. His eyes locked on Gelebor for a second, but lost focus in the next moment. "Lady Mara calls to me. No, please. Don't shed tears for an old priest."

Gelebor felt wetness on his cheeks. Oh, so he was crying. When did that happen?

"I'm quite pleased." Erandur took a deep breath. "To hear her voice. I feared I hadn't done enough. To make up for the wrongs. I'm still Casimir in my head, you know. I still love my brothers."

"No. Wait." Gelebor put a hand on Erandur's shoulder, but when he pulled it away, it was wet with blood. "I'll get help for you."

"Don't trouble yourself, son. I'm ready to go. Maybe I'll see Veren and Thorek again. I so dearly miss them."

"Just hold on a moment. Nadene is coming." She was, wasn't she? She had promised.

"Give my love to Habi." Erandur's hand found his. The priest's skin was so warm, so alive. How could he be dying? "Tell her I'm sorry I didn't get to see her trial. I'm certain...she'll make a wonderful guard."

"I don't understand what's happening." Gelebor watched Erandur's chest rise and fall, more slowly each time.

"Tell me," Erandur spoke, his voice a whisper. "Did I save the child? Did I save Eldrus? In the fighting, I could not see."

Eldrus. Who is Eldrus? Gelebor looked up. Across the yurt, a Khajiit was kneeling beside a small form. *Kharjo.*

"I see someone," he told Erandur, but the light had left the priest's eyes. *Don't worry. Nadene will be here soon.* Gelebor gently closed his eyelids, so he could rest, and went to the Khajiit's side.

"There's too much blood," Kharjo said, his voice teetering on the edge of madness. "We need the Nerevarine. By the moons, where is she?"

"I don't know." Kharjo was right. There was blood everywhere. How could a body so small be filled with so much? Gelebor brushed the back of his finger against a small, pale face. *Vyrthur. I killed you again. You poor little soul.*

He rose.

"Where are you going?" Kharjo's fur was matted with red, and he was still desperately attending to the child. "Do not leave!"

"Red Mountain." Gelebor turned away. He had his mace; he needed nothing else. "It's time."

"You fool. Giving yourself to them will not put an end to this!"

"I'm not surrendering." The machinations of his fate had been reduced to a simple calculus. There were mere hours before the cannibals would strike again. *No one else will die for me.* "I'm going to

kill them all."

She entered the yurt shortly after dawn. Kharjo's arms had long since gone numb, but he maintained the pressure on the wound. *More than I could do for my sweet kittens. Why is this world so cruel to the young?*

"Help me," Kharjo said weakly. "Please."

Nadene gently pushed him aside, her hands already aglow with magicka.

"Rest, Kharjo. You've done all you can, and you've done it well."

Her words barely reached the realm of comprehension, he was so exhausted. He stared up at the kreshfibre canvas of the yurt, eyelids flickering.

"Where's his grandmother?"

"Khajiit believes...they are burning the one who did this." The scent of burning flesh had permeated the air, even here.

She nodded grimly, pulled off her helmet, and bent over the child. Kharjo succumbed to the tides of sleep.

He awoke several hours later.

"He will live?" Kharjo crawled over to them, looking down at a bandaged Eldrus.

"It was a close thing." Nadene ran her fingers through the boy's black curls. "Too close. I should have been here."

"The Knight-Paladin...he has gone to Red Mountain."

"I suspected as much." She stood and walked over to Erandur. Kharjo joined her, and together they covered him with the softest blanket they could find.

"Without his help, we never would have made it this far." Nadene sighed. "Give me your sword, Kharjo."

He wordlessly passed the weapon to her. She replaced her helmet, and they left the yurt.

Nadene paused abruptly outside, and knelt down to search through the ash. When she rose again, there was a gleaming six-pointed ornament on her finger. *Moon-and-Star*.

They found Sakani and the Ashlanders gathered around the bonfire, a charred corpse before them. Kharjo noticed several faces missing, elves he had commanded at the southern pass.

"The Nerevarine returns," Sakani crowed. "While you conferred with Azura, blood was righteously spilled upon the ash. At last, we taste true battle. What did our goddess have to say? How shall we strike back at Namira?"

Nadene was silent for a long time. Her masked visage offered no hint as to her thoughts. The villagers were deathly quiet, glancing between their wise woman and ancient champion.

"I know who you are." Nadene's damning words echoed in the silence. "Let this folly end. We're both far too old for such nonsense as this."

All expression fled from Sakani's face. She regarded Nadene with cold, sober eyes. Then she withdrew a dagger from the folds of her robes.

"I'm coming for you," Nadene said. "I'm coming to Red Mountain."

"You will find there wisdom." Sakani plunged the dagger into her own stomach. The Ashlanders gasped. "A firm friend." Again she stabbed, blood washing past her hand like a crimson river. "And all the power you need, to set the world aright."

Nadene stepped forward and swung the sword. It was a clean cut. Sakani's head fell to the ash, and her body crumpled like a puppet whose strings had been cut away.

"Sakani!" Someone screamed.

"No," said another. Niranil, the elf who had stood with Gelebor. "No, I don't think so. Not anymore. We were misled, my brothers and sisters. 'Twas not Azura's voice in our poor wise woman's ears, was it?"

"No. It wasn't." Nadene handed Kharjo his weapon. "I'm going to Red Mountain. I'm going to save Gelebor, and my granddaughter, and rid Vvardenfell of this madness forever. Kharjo, will you stand with me?"

"Always, Nadene." He sheathed the sword. "Let us go rescue our friends."

"And who else?"

No one spoke up at first. And then Niranil came forward.

"Ho, Nerevarine." He beat the bottom of his spear against the ground. "Ho, Nerevarine!"

The warriors joined him, their shouts and yells stoking the flames of passion, and then the others, the women and children, the old and the weak. "Ho, Nerevarine! Ho, Nerevarine! To fire and war! *Ho, Nerevarine!*"

"Let's go."

Come, Sweet Death

Content Warning: The rest of this story is the reason for the M rating. Please review if you enjoy - epilogue posted tomorrow!

"Let us now guide the hands of the Hortator in war and its aftermath. For we go different, and in thunder. This is our destiny." - 36 Lessons of Vivec, Sermon 8

Habisunulu crept down the citadel passageway, the dim lanterns of a lost race illuminating her path. The Khajiit children were in her pack, an accessory hastily looted from the unconscious form of a Dunmer guard.

They had scant minutes before the battered cultist would awake and alert his hungry brothers and sisters, and Habi was no closer to escaping this fortress. Every hallway seemed much the same. Dwarven metal and stone covered nearly every surface, but in a few places the raw form of Red Mountain had broken through, revealing volcanic rock so dark that Habi shuddered to behold it.

We out soon, Habs? Renji spoke in her head. ***Jo'ahni wants to see the moons.***

"Out soon," Habi murmured under her breath. Around any corner, their enemy could be lying in wait. "At least, I hope so."

Ahk'idzo and his wife had refused to go with them. All that talk about reserving his strength, only to turn away when the opportunity came to escape. *Coward*. When Habi returned to rescue the rest of the Balmorans, she would have some choice words for that Khajiit.

Steps ahead, Renji warned. **Coming fast**. His ears and eyes were sharper than hers. Habi held her breath and slid behind a large pipe, holding the dagger to her chest.

"Ain't seeing any greyskins." Banning's voice. He sounded almost amused. "No little cats, neither." Three figures entered the passageway, their faces shrouded in darkness.

"Quiet." Here was someone Habi did not recognize. A tall, severe-looking Dunmer with a top-knot. "Down, betmer. Sniff out your cellmates."

Habi barely stifled her cry of outrage. Ahk'idzo was pushed to the ground, landing on his hands and knees. The Dunmer planted a heavy boot on the small of his back.

Ahk'idzo coughed, and then spoke weakly. "You swear Marasa and I will be allowed to roam the citadel freely?"

"I promised you as much." The Dunmer frowned. "But if you are deceiving me, then I will devour your mate as you watch. And then I will break your back and leave you for the kwama foragers. I have seen them take weeks to completely consume a being."

Banning shuffled his feet. "Maybe we oughta tell Eola the little greyskin escaped, Aymdil. Seems like somethin' she should know."

"Did I ask for your thoughts on the matter?" Aymdil turned his head, glaring. "It was under your watch that these prisoners broke free. I wonder what our mistress would think of your failure, should you report to her empty handed."

For a moment it looked as if Banning might strike the mer. His fists clenched, and the muscles in his jaw worked like a dwarven piston. But then his eyes fell to the ground, and he let out a heavy sigh.

"Yeah, guess you're right."

"Of course I am. Now, stand farther away from me. You reek of hounds."

Ahk'idzo exclaimed, "Hold on. I smell something."

Habi leaned back, her heart racing. *Watchful Azura, lend us your aid. Please.*

"What?" Aymdil scanned the passageway, his fingers dancing on the hilt of his sword. He dug his boot into the Khajiit's back. "Speak, worm."

"The little kittens. They are close."

Silence reigned for a time. Finally, Aymdil spoke again.

"You may be right, Banning. Eola will want to know what's going on. She only just finished disposing of the Nerevarine."

Impossible. A lie, meant to draw me out of hiding. The Khajiit were as still and rigid as stalhrim in her pack. Renji was managing to restrain his terror, for the most part, but it rolled off Jo'ahni and stole into Habi's own mind. She hoped the cultists weren't near enough to feel it.

Banning didn't respond, but Aymdil continued.

"Yes, the mistress told me the foolish little woman attacked her with a bow. A fine glass piece, made by a masterterful Dunmer smith. You're somewhat of an archer, no? Perhaps Eola will let you wield the Nerevarine's bow in the battles to come."

The pent up trauma of long days erupted from Habi at the utterance of that unforgivable offer. She wiped the angry tears from her eyes with the ragged sleeve of her tunic, and leapt at Banning with her dagger held high.

Habi didn't have the weight to knock him down, but the blade still found a place in his back. Banning yelped like a dog and staggered forward, blood soaking his shirt. Habi spun quickly to face Aymdil, her fists raised in the fighting style of the Redoran guard.

"Pull it out," Banning whimpered. He fell to his knees next to Ahk'idzo. The Khajiit scampered away from them all, his eyes wide with fear. "Oh, gods."

Habs, no! Habi mentally pushed Renji's words aside. They were only a distraction.

"You people took everything from me," she spoke, her voice trembling. *I have to be strong.* "My home. My best friend. My grandmother. I'm going to kill *all* of you."

"The Nerevarine is not dead," Aymdil replied coolly. "Not yet."

Meaty fingers closed around Habi's ankle. She had only a second to register Banning's face rising towards her, twisted in fury and pain.

"Little greyskin bitch."

Stars exploded in her vision, and she tasted blood and tears. Habi didn't have time to raise her fists

before Banning struck her again, sending her to the ground.

HABS! Aymdil tore the pack away. Habi scrambled to her feet, Renji's cry serving as a final rejuvenator. Banning sent her back down once more, this time for good. Her eyes were obscured in crimson.

"Please," she wept. "No more. I promise...I won't cause any trouble."

Aymdil looked down at her. "I'm sure of it. Banning, I'll take her to the Heart Chamber. Go find a neophyte to help you with that wound."

The Dunmer's callused hands were reaching for Habi, Renji's cries echoing through her head, when all went dark.

On the blasted slopes of Red Mountain, Gelebor suffered alone. He'd drained his last protective potion hours ago. The hot air scorched his lungs, and with every breath he took, the poisonous ash took a greater toll. *No matter. I just have to be strong enough to kill Eola.*

The priestesses' map seemed to be accurate. He stood before Dagoth Ur, a citadel of the Sixth House Nadene had destroyed so long ago. It seemed remarkably intact. *From the exterior, at least.* Gelebor wiped the sweat and dirt from his eyes and crept along the ridgeway of black rock. Far below, the lava pools of Red Mountain sizzled and spat.

They will be expecting me. But perhaps not so soon. Was every one of the cultists privy to Eola's plots, or only the upper echelon? The answer to that question would determine how long it was going to take him to fight his way to their leader. The map's directions ended at one of the hatches to the citadel, providing no hint as to what may lay inside. It was possible he would enter a room full of enemies, ready to tie him up and perform their vile ritual. *If so, let it be done quickly. There's no need for Nadene to be caught up in this.*

Gelebor approached the portal. A weathered lever extruded from the nearest pipe, waiting for his touch. *My entire life has led to these next moments.* He looked up, though he could not see the sky.

"Is this what you wanted, all along?" Gelebor asked. "For me to perish in vain, so far from the snows of the Vale?" When they were children, he'd told Vyrthur it was folly to try to make sense of Auriel's intentions. His brother had evidently not taken this advice, and it had led him to madness and eternal agony. *Perhaps we were cursed from the start. The mother that birthed us must have committed grave crimes against Auriel. Our lives have been a punishment against this faceless and nameless woman.*

What other explanation could there be? To a child born in pain, a quick death was a mercy. But he and Vyrthur had known happiness, contentment, for almost three decades. In the form of the priests and soldiers of the Forgotten Vale, they had been given the family fate had taken from them. Such an ephemeral taste of life, given the millenia that had followed, but it had been enough. *I should have known better than to think I could have that again. I should have learned my lesson.*

He drew his mace and yanked on the lever before fear could stay his hand. The lever screeched, hurting his ears, and the hatch slid open with a groan of dwarven metal. Gelebor slipped inside before it finished, his mind scoured clean of doubts and worries. *This is my final mission. For Vyrthur, for the Snow Elf islanders, for Kharjo and his family, for Nadene Othryn and Habisinulu.*

The first chamber was narrow and dimly lit. Flickering dwemer lanterns hung from the ceiling,

powered by some unseen force. Two Dunmer ran at him. One was young, no older than Nadene's granddaughter, wearing a bonemold helmet too large for him and wielding a chitin spear. The other was clearly more experienced; he wore netch leather from head to toe, and held two swords in his hands.

"Where's Eola?" Gelebor asked, raising his weapon.

"We'll take you to her," the young one said. "In the Heart Chamber. Hand over your weapon."

"N'wah," the other mer cursed, and said something else in Dunmeris.

It wasn't much information, but it would have to do. He rushed the older mer, who was clearly the greater threat. Gelebor ducked under the first sword, and the second deflected harmlessly off the Snow Prince's breastplate. By then he was inside the Dunmer's defenses. He drove his forehead into the smaller elf's face, stunning him, and followed it up with a blow from his mace. The ragged warrior's head was ripped from his shoulders, spraying Gelebor in blood. He stepped back and wiped his eyes clean.

The young Dunmer ran.

Eola can't know I'm coming. Gelebor considered for a second and threw his mace. The mer had not yet reached the turn for the next passageway when the weapon struck him in the back of the leg. Gelebor heard his bones crack from across the chamber. The Dunmer screamed.

"Please," he wailed as Gelebor approached. "Mercy!"

"Shut up," Gelebor said. "You're going to alert the others."

"I couldn't help it...voices in my head. They poisoned us, in the city. You don't understand!"

"I do not care." Gelebor knelt, wrapping his hand around the boy's neck. "If you don't be quiet, I *will* kill you."

This only seemed to exacerbate the Dunmer's anguish. He cried out again and clawed weakly at Gelebor's wrist, unable to get under the heavy gauntlet.

His grip tightened. "Shut the fuck up."

The boy began hyperventilating, the rhythmic sound filling the chamber like a heartbeat. Gelebor was overcome by an intense loathing. *So weak. So powerless. These are the beings who were to conquer the world? They deserved to inherit the realm my people left behind? No. Never.*

"Mumma," the youngling gasped. "Help me..."

The skin around the Dunmer's neck darkened. Gelebor watched, detached, as the boy's struggles faltered, and the fingers scrambling at his chokehold slowed their movements. The breathing became blissfully silent.

"Good," Gelebor murmured. "That's all I wanted from you. A little quiet. Will you cooperate, if I let you go?"

He offered no response. Gelebor released his grip, and leaned back. The chamber was as still as a crypt.

"Hello?" He gently shook the child's shoulders. "I'm sorry I was so rough. You need to tell me how

to reach the Heart Chamber from here."

Perhaps he's fallen unconscious. Gelebor leaned forward and slipped the Dunmer's helmet off. The face underneath was young. So young. Sixteen or seventeen years, at most. Thin facial hair, like the fuzz of a peach, covered his lower face.

Gelebor looked down at his hands, covered in blood and scraps of grey skin. The child's neck was purple with bruises. *The shapes of my fingers.* He saw his reflection in the steel of his fallen foe's sword. A pale, bloodstained face, contorted in fury. White hair clumped close to his skull, heavy with ash and filth and vital fluids. Eyes strained and bloodshot, alight with lethal mania. Gelebor had spent most of his life dreading the sight of such a countenance. *I have become the Betrayed. Oh, Vyrthur. What's happened to us?*

What have I done?

Panic seized Gelebor. He straddled the young elf and beat desperately on his chest, all else forgotten. He bent over the mer and lifted his neck, sharing his own breath. Gelebor continued in this way for several minutes before the young cultist violently returned to life, in a spray of saliva and hungry gasps of air.

The boy scrambled away from Gelebor and vanished into the darkness, his croaks gradually transforming into shouts.

Gelebor sat on the ground, closed his eyes, and waited for the other cultists to find him.

Pain, darkness, warmth on her face. Habi was blindfolded. Where Aymdil had thrown her, she could feel steel bars against her back. Already the covering over her eyes was sticky with sweat. Waves of heat washed over her. *They're gonna throw me in the volcano. I'm going to burn to death.* Even if Habi could see anything of her surroundings, she hadn't the strength to lift her head from the cold floor of the cage. Thoughts passed through her head like shooting stars, too quickly to make sense of any of them. *Renji. Jo'ahni. They were my friends.*

There were many beings in this chamber. She could tell that much, at least. The many footsteps against the volcanic rock were hard to miss, as were the whispered voices of excitement. She heard the distinctive laugh of Banning somewhere in the distance, like the braying of a nix hound. What she didn't hear, in her mind or her ears, were any Khajiit. *They must have...when they decided the little ones were too small to make a meal, they...* Habi could not bring herself to think about it. A single tear traced a path through the dried blood on her cheek.

A murmur of activity in the gathered cultists. Something was happening. Habi turned her ear towards the crowd, wincing at the pain such a movement summoned. Someone, or many someones, were coming towards the cage.

"He's here!" A Dunmer voice cried out in delight. "The meal of prophecy!"

"What are we waiting for?" Another shouted. "The fated time is upon us!"

Aymdil barked, "Stay back, my brothers and sisters. You will all have your place in the promised feast. This I swear to you in the name of Namira."

The meal of prophecy. Habi had heard the cultists speaking of such things, of course, but somehow it hadn't occurred to her this meal would come in the form of a living being.

The cage door opened with a creak. The meal's escorts ignored her, which she was glad for. She

expected the pitiful creature to be thrown in the cage as carelessly as she was, but she felt the meal being placed down gently beside her. The cultists receded, and the door closed again.

Mutterings of hunger and lust surrounded the cage. The breathing of many beings caught up in rapture. *Oh, gods. I don't want to die like this.*

"Children of Namira," Aymdil called out. "Leave the promised meal to stew, for now. His time will come in mere minutes. Ildrasi, go tell the mistress that he has arrived. The rest of you, join me around the altar in a final prayer to our lady."

The ravenous watchers followed his commands. Habi's heartbeat slowed. *A reprieve, for the moment.*

"Would you like me to take that off for you?" The captured being asked politely. A male's voice, in an Elven accent she couldn't place. *Altmer. Or a high-class Bosmer, perhaps.* Her addled mind gratefully seized onto the distraction.

"Okay," Habi rasped. One of Banning's blows had taken her in the throat. It was a wonder her windpipe hadn't collapsed.

Large, warm fingers on her face. It was strange to feel a touch that didn't end in pain. One of her eyes was swollen shut, but with the other Habi saw the palest elf she'd ever come across in her short time on Tamriel. *And perhaps the most fit, as well.* He wore only a thin tunic and pants, his blindingly white arms exposed.

"I'm a Snow Elf," he supplied with a weary smile. "Or at least I will be for a few minutes more. My name is Gelebor. Once I was a Knight-Paladin of Auriel, sworn to guard the wayshrines of the Forgotten Vale and guide pilgrims on the path to true clarity. I came from the land you know as Skyrim, but it was not my home. I have no home, no faith, no weapons. My armor has been taken from me. I expect the woman I love will be arriving here soon, despite my wish for her to remain safely away. I'm afraid I do not think Nadene will arrive in time to save us."

"Nadene? Nadene Othryn? She's alive?" *And she's coming here!*

"Oh, yes." Gelebor rested his hand on her shoulder. "We came such a long way to find you, Habisunuli. You have my dearest apology."

"For what?"

"For what you're about to witness." His eyes stared past her. "What these cultists have been preparing for since they landed on Vvardenfell. I know not if their prophecy holds any true strength. I will not live to discover the truth, in any case. I have made my peace with that."

"Knight-Paladin," Eola said. She pressed her face against the bars, staring past Habi as if she didn't exist. "I'm so happy you've come. I knew you would see my point of view, in time."

Gelebor rose to his feet. "Give Nadene my love, Habi. I'm sorry we will never get to know each other better."

Eola opened the door. Beyond her, Habi saw for the first time the horrific place they'd been brought to. A cavern that seemed too capacious for such a small word; the ceiling, if there was one, hid far above Habi's meager view. They were on one of the craggy lips of the chamber, stretching around a massive emptiness that led down to the boundless lava pool below. Dozens of cultists in tattered robes and scraps of armor were gathered around an ebony altar, nearly all of them Dunmer. Sparks of flame and clouds of poison drifted through the air. This was a place that had never

known darkness. The fires here had been burning since the beginning of time.

"No." Habi struggled to stand. "Don't take him."

"*Silence!*" Eola screamed, kicking her back into the corner of the cage. Gelebor bowed his head and left the small prison, and the priestess followed. Habi watched helplessly as they walked to the ebony altar. The cultists circling the ritual place made an opening for the two to enter, and then closed ranks around them.

"You've done it, my love." Lisbet embraced Eola, holding her tightly. "From that first moment I saw you, when you walked into my shop in Markarth, I knew you were a woman destined for greatness."

"I wouldn't have made it this far without you." Eola kissed Lisbet tenderly, then gently pushed her away. She nodded to Ayndil, and even provided a warm smile to Banning. "Without all of my brothers and sisters. What we have built here is the work of a legion. Be proud, followers of the Great Darkness! Look upon the fruits of your labor!"

Gelebor stood upon the altar, his eyes closed. The cultists cheered and shouted, their arms raised in worship.

"The last true child of Akatosh is ours!" Nadene knelt down, and when she rose she had a large enameled breastplate in her hands. "He came here wearing the armor of his lost people. But to the Scuttling Void, he will go in rags." She strolled to the edge of the cavern's lip, and dropped the heavy breastplate over the side. The rest of the armor set soon followed, destined for the lava below. With each piece tossed in, the cultists' roars grew in intensity.

Eola returned to the altar, her hands raised in victory. When the crowd had fallen quiet again, she drew a serrated dagger from her hip. *The dagger that killed Erandur*. Habi could barely watch. *Am I about to witness the end of the world?*

"On your knees," Eola ordered harshly. Gelebor obeyed. Namira's inner circle gathered around him. The other cultists could barely keep themselves still, hopping from foot to foot like overstimulated children. "Where all the Aedra belong. With the consumption of this Knight-Paladin's blood and bile, we will break the sacred covenant between the Lord of Time and the mortal world. Nations will fall, and Namira will rise. We seek not to conquer, but to consume. Come, Ayndil. See how I reward those that are loyal to Namira. I promised you the first bite. Take my dagger, and be the hallowed architect of the world's undoing."

Banning forced Gelebor's shoulders down, so the Snow Elf stared up at the ceiling. Even from her cage Habi could see he was trembling. She didn't plead for Azura's help. She knew better now.

"Thank you, mistress." Ayndil accepted the blade. All went quiet in the great cavern. Not even a whisper could be heard. "I believe I will take his forearm, first."

The flames of Red Mountain danced like wicked spirits against the metal of the sharpened blade as it fell through the air. Habisunilu screamed, and the cultists screamed back, lost in the throes of ecstasy and hunger. They pressed in towards the altar. Over their heads she saw Ayndil raise a pale hand above him, drinking in the cries of his fellow cultists, and then bit into the flesh. Blood ran down his weathered cheeks and neck.

A momentary pulse of fire, and then the smell of cooked flesh. Habi crawled across the cage, dogged in her pursuit to find a way to kill herself before they came for her. A broken bone with a jagged edge would be enough to get the job done. She was still searching when the chamber fell

silent again.

"Did it work?" Banning asked, scratching his chin. His voice seemed small in the vastness of the cavern "I don't feel no different."

"We won't be able to tell from inside the mountain." Lisbet pointed out, though she cast a worried glance at Eola. "The prophecy said Namira's children would awaken across Nirn. We already belong to her. Right?"

Banning frowned. "Still expected a flash of light, or the Lady's voice, or somethin' like that. She spoke when Eola was chosen as champion, but not for this? Maybe we need a bigger sacrifice. Take his head, this time."

"I..." Eola swayed unsteadily. "I feel unwell."

Lisbet caught the priestess before she could fall. "Aymdil, help me with her."

The Dunmer stood away from them, watching with an unreadable expression on his face. His eyes flickered to Eola, and then to the altar. He licked his lips.

"Damn you!" Lisbet cursed at him. "This is your mistress. She needs our help!"

Eola groaned in pain. "My love...this isn't what was meant to happen. Something's gone terribly wrong."

"No. Don't say that. You're alright. I've got you."

"No...the voice in my head." Tears of blood spilled down her cheeks. "We were deceived. Oh, my sweet Lisbet. I never should have brought us to this place."

"Hush, now. You're fine. We're going to your quarters, and you're going to tell me which potions to give you." Lisbet took a deep breath and slipped her arm beneath the other woman's legs, carrying her towards an opening in the wall. "Okay?"

Eola didn't respond. Her head was limp against Lisbet's shoulder.

"Hey!" Banning called out. "What're we doin' here, Liz?" A shudder of unease ran through the gathered cultists.

Lisbet ignored him. She vanished with her mortal cargo into the opening, leaving the children of Namira without their mistress.

Many eyes turned towards Banning.

"What're ya looking at me, for?" He spat at the ground. "I don't know no more than you all do. Guess we'll just have to wait for the ladies to get back."

Aymdil emerged from the crowd. The dagger was still in his hand, dripping with Gelebor's blood.

"Put the blade down, for void's sake. Ain't nobody getting another piece without Eola's say so. Without her, you'd still be eating ash and bug shells. Don't soon forget that."

The slender Dunmer took another step towards Banning. The rest of the mer watched in silence.

Banning swallowed, evidently realizing just how alone he was now. He drew his own dagger and raised it protectively, slowly backing towards the opening. None of the Dunmer moved to stop

him.

"Fucking greyskins," Banning snarled. "I told Eola this was a bad idea." With that, he made his escape.

Aymdil sheathed his weapon. All the elves turned towards the altar in unison. Habi could now see Gelebor lying motionless, his left arm ending in a cauterized stump. He seemed thankfully unconscious.

The fear gripped her heart in one final harrowing moment. She allowed herself to panic for a few seconds. *The final seconds of my life. I am the last of Veloth's people. Ash runs in my blood. I do not cower.*

"Hey," she shouted, unwisely. "Leave him alone!"

Many of the cultists looked up, their expressions dull and uninterested. She felt a rush of triumph. *That's it, you fetchers. Come over here.*

"He will not be harmed," Aymdil said calmly. "He is very important to us. One of the three."

"Who is 'us'?" Habi slammed her fist into the bars, frustrated. "What are the three?"

"You would not understand. Your mind is not ready."

From the dark opening that led to the rest of the citadel, a bloodcurdling scream. The sharp sound of a woman in mortal agony. Habi's eyes widened. The cultists turned from the altar towards the opening, Gelebor and Habi completely forgotten.

"Explain to me what's happening!"

Aymdil's eyes brightened. "The return. The return to Red Mountain. I have been waiting a long time for this."

Habi slid to her knees, resigned to her ignorance. The screaming had stopped, and the air in the chamber was still. The world seemed to be holding its breath. *If you're truly coming, grandmother, now would be the time.*

A tall figure stepped from the shadowed portal. What had been a woman named Eola was her no longer. Legs had lengthened grotesquely, torn muscles pushing against stretched skin. Long gray arms terminated in leathery hands with nails long enough to brush the ground below. In one claw it gripped a woman's ankle: Lisbet was dragged behind like a basket of salttrice. The torso was a mess of tattered flesh and cloth, a new form fighting to assert itself against the old.

Atop it all, a golden mask with three ebony eyes. A matching number of square extrusions sprouted from the top of the ornament, shining brilliantly in the firelight of Red Mountain. Habi knew the face. She had spent much of her childhood seeing it in her nightmares.

"Eola!" Lisbet cried out. "Give her back!"

Dagoth Ur held the cultist up to the light. His golden face was inches from her. Lisbet flailed, her blows landing uselessly against firm muscle.

Ribbons of flame rippled down his arms and into the Nord woman. She screamed, her flesh burning and melting. Dagoth Ur threw her against the cavern wall, as casually as one might dispose of an empty kwama shell. Lisbet writhed in anguish for almost a minute before going still.

"The Sixth House is risen," Aymdil spoke. "And Dagoth is its glory. I served the intruder as you instructed, my lord. The minds of these others have been weakened. They are ready to share in the dream, now. They are ready to hear the song."

Dagoth Ur made no reply. The mask turned towards the altar, towards Gelebor still dead to the world.

Ash storms battered Veloth's people the entire journey to Red Mountain. Nadene had ordered them to bring along everyone in the village, even the old and the young, even wounded Eldrus. There would be no returning to the Valley of the Winds. *That is, if all goes to plan.* She wasn't sure if the Ashlanders grasped the situation entirely. It was very likely that all of them would grow to loathe her, in the afterwards. *No matter. At least they'll be alive to hate me.*

They lost a few men to the storms, and by the time they arrived at the citadel the survivors were exhausted. Even Dunmer had their limits, when it came to the toils of Vvardenfell. The children had fallen asleep. On a flat rock near the entrance hatch, one of the tribal healers attended to Eldrus.

"Niranil," Nadene said. He came up to her, his spear held at the ready. "I need you to remain outside and guard the others. I'm taking six warriors. You'll have the rest."

"A half-dozen fighters, against our enemies combined and fortified?" The Ashlander frowned. "I do not understand. And I wish to put my cursed father to rest. I cannot do that if I'm guarding the weak."

"I'll have Kharjo, too." The Khajiit nodded gravely, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I promise I'll take care of your father. What I'm asking you to do is very important, Niranil. The survival of everyone depends on it. There will be a Dunmer here soon. A tall and generally unpleasant wizard with a long beard. Do everything he says, and watch for Kharjo's return. Okay?"

"Okay. I swore to follow you, Nerevarine, and I will follow your orders, strange as they may be. Be careful in the citadel. I smell dark magic at work."

You don't know the half of it. Nadene, Kharjo, and their small band of warriors entered the citadel of Dagoth Ur without further delay. There was a dead body in the antechamber, but they encountered no further resistance as they descended into the bowels of the facility. The lack of combatants did nothing to ease Nadene's worries.

"They must be gathered somewhere," Nadene murmured.

"For their ritual, perhaps?" Kharjo shifted nervously. He, too, had become more agitated as they went along. *Does he still expect to find Eola, here? Surely he's sensed that all is not as it seems.* "Khajiit hopes they have not arrived too late for the Knight-Paladin."

"Me too, Kharjo. Me too."

They found most of the Balmorans unguarded in their cells. Nearly a hundred souls, pressed in tightly against the walls, dishes of mer flesh sitting untouched or half-eaten before them. *These poor Dunmer. What did they do to deserve this?*

"You mer," Nadene pointed to her warriors. "Set these townspeople free, then lead them back to Niranil on the surface. If the wizard has arrived, tell him that the Nerevarine said to begin the process."

"As you command, Hortator." The lead Ashlander bowed his head, and the six went to work on the prisoners' cells. Nadene and Kharjo forged onward, and she tried to focus her mind on the task ahead.

Old memories rose to the surface as they walked the metal hallways, summoned by the noxious familiarity of her surroundings. Two centuries, and the nightmares had not left her. Nadene suspected they never would. She had barely emerged alive from this citadel the first time around, her body covered in shallow wounds and the scorch marks of magical attacks. Her favored weapon, the Bow of Shadows, had been destroyed, along with most of her armor. *And now I'm older, more out of practice, with one less eye. What could go wrong?*

Finally they came to the Heart Chamber. The heavy dwemer door was closed. Nadene took a deep breath.

"Ready?" She asked.

"Khajiit is prepared to claim vengeance for his family at last." Kharjo drew his sword. "Finally, I can fulfill my purpose."

"Listen, Kharjo. Whatever we find in there, you have to do what I say." Nadene was glad her face was hidden behind the ordinator helmet, so he wouldn't be able to see the doubt in her eyes.

"Promise me."

"Very well. Khajiit swears to follow your lead."

The door slid open, and they stepped inside.

Dozens of heads turned towards them, twisted in fury and confusion.

"Step away from him," Nadene's voice echoed in the cavernous chamber. "Right now, Voryn."

"Welcome, Moon-and-Star." Dagoth Ur's voice was shockingly ordinary. That was one thing she'd never grown used to. "To see you again brings a smile to my face. Lay down your weapons. I have no intention of harming you."

"First, let the others leave. Release them from your grip."

Dagoth Ur cocked his head, almost curiously. "This is something you know I cannot do, Nerevar. You laid waste to the Tribe Unmourned, leaving us with few disciples. Your own army is lost to time and fate. These gathered dozens will serve us faithfully in the wars to come, and their ranks will swell with conquest."

"I don't care. You went through a lot of trouble to bring me to this place, to talk to me." She grabbed a knife from her belt and raised it to her throat. "Let these people go, or I'll kill myself right here. You know I'm not bluffing."

"As bold as ever. Very well." Dagoth Ur raised his hand towards the cultists. Most of them began looking around, blinking, obviously unaware of their surroundings. A few began weeping. Only Ayndil remained still, by his master's side. "They were a means to an end that has been fulfilled. Unfit to be instruments of the Sixth House. Dispose of these wretches in any manner you deem fit, Moon-And-Star. Then we shall speak for the Law and the Land, one last time."

"Grandmother!" A girl's voice called out. Nadene rushed to the cage, and unlatched the door with trembling hands. Habisinuli launched into her arms, so dreadfully thin. *My baby. What have they done to you?*

"I've got you." Nadene stroked her back. "You're safe, little sera."

"I knew it," Habi said. "I knew you would come for me. I didn't - the others, they ate the food the cultists gave them, but I didn't do it. I never surrendered to Namira."

"I knew you wouldn't. You've always been very stubborn."

"Your friend...I'm sorry. I couldn't keep Eola from taking him. I don't know if he's..." Her eyes stared past Nadene, towards the altar.

"Don't worry about any of that." Nadene squeezed her shoulder. "I'm going to take care of it. Now, I need you to do something for me. To be strong for a little while longer. These Dunmer have been under Dagoth Ur's influence, but now they're free. That Khajiit behind me is named Kharjo. You need to help him lead them out of the citadel." *Before the Sharmat catches on and tries to control them again.* That last part, she left unsaid. He was no doubt listening in.

"No." Habi wiped the tears from her cheeks and glared fiercely. "I'm not gonna leave you to die."

"I'll be right behind you," Nadene lied. "Please, Habi. I won't be able to fight if I'm worried about you getting caught in the crossfire. And Kharjo doesn't speak Dunmeris. He'll need your assistance."

She bit her lip. "Fine. Right behind us, you said. If you don't show up after we get to the surface, I'm going back to get you."

"Agreed." Nadene embraced Habi again and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm so proud of you. Now go." *Go, before I lose all my strength.* The sight of her granddaughter's bruised face had nearly been enough to undo her.

Habi limped towards the freed cultists, already barking orders in Dunmeris. *She's going to make a fine Redoran Guard, once all of this is over.*

"Where is Eola?" Kharjo asked darkly. "Who is this tall Dunmer, who wears her clothes and hides his face? Khajiit does not understand."

"Eola is dead, Kharjo. Or near enough not to matter." Nadene spoke in a hushed whisper. "Whoever you came here to destroy, Dagoth Ur has done the job for you."

Kharjo turned his head towards the masked figure beside the altar, who watched them silently.

"Truly? This is the one your people call the Sharmat?" The anger had left his voice. "Then Khajiit knows his adversary has met a fate worse than death. That must be enough."

"Of course it is." Nadene gripped his arm. "Leave this place. Don't let revenge consume you, as it did Voryn Dagoth. Go with Habi and save these people. Tell me. Do you still have that fireball scroll I gave you outside the Telvanni estates?"

Kharjo felt around in his satchel. "Yes."

Nadene hugged him, and spoke low into his ear. "When you reach the surface, destroy the entrance behind you. None must leave or enter this citadel ever again."

"But you and the Knight-Paladin..." Kharjo drew back, his brow creased. "You can not ask me to abandon my friends. What will I be, after leaving this place? A Khajiit without purpose, without the love of his family or his companions. No. Better to die here, I think."

"A coward's words." It hurt Nadene to say it, but there was little time. "I sometimes forget how young you are. There's nothing brave about dying, Kharjo. It's a horrible, awful thing. And remarkably easy, especially on Vvardenfell. You want a purpose? Protect my granddaughter. Help her get off this island. After that, stay with her if it pleases you. Habi is going to need people who love her, now that her entire world has been destroyed. Tell her of your family, and of the adventures we shared on Solstheim. Take her to beautiful places and fill her life with happiness and warmth. If you still want to die after that, Gelebor and I will be waiting. Without judgement or regret, whether you join us today or in ten thousand days. We both know how difficult it is, to live."

"Very well," Kharjo replied hoarsely, turning his head away. "Khajiit can not find the right words. So he will simply say: farewell. Farewell, Nadene Othryn. If you should speak to the Knight-Paladin again, tell him that I loved him as a brother."

"He knows." Nadene closed her eyes, so she would not cry. "Goodbye. Keep Habi close. And don't forget to seal the hatch."

She kept her eyes shut for several minutes. There were stumbling footsteps as the befuddled Balmorans and Ashlanders were led from the room, and she heard the hushed voices of Habi and Kharjo urging them along. She thought she'd be more afraid, at this point, but all Nadene felt was a weary sense of resignation. Some part of her had always known she'd end up back in the Heart Chamber, looking up at that golden mask. Indoril Nerevar and the Tribunal had killed Voryn Dagoth the first time. Nadene had sent him to the darkness twice herself, and that third death was meant to be final. *This time around, I must leave nothing to chance.* Morrowind had a long memory, but it had forgotten the persisting menace of House Dagoth too many times now. She wasn't going to leave Dagoth Ur to be someone else's problem in another two centuries. *This time, it has to be forever.*

"A valiant effort, but in vain." Dagoth Ur looked towards the opening, where the last released Dunmer had disappeared a minute ago. "My influence spreads across Vvardenfell. None will depart, without my consent. Do you truly believe the seaworthy vessels of the Telvanni escaped my notice? Your cunning and deceit will not serve you well in this place. I sent one of my followers to scorch the docks hours ago, my naïve old friend."

"You have?" Nadene asked, in a shocked voice.

"Oh, yes. You are clever, Nerevar, but I have had two centuries to watch the world and form my plans. All variables have been accounted for. The Sixth House has awoken from its long dream once again."

Nadene stepped past him, to look down at the altar. Gelebor was still, and his skin seemed even paler than usual. But if she looked closely, she could see the gentle rise and fall of his chest.

"His hand," she said softly.

"This was not my work. I have never had any intention of harming your beloved mate. Alas, the tools of my resurrection were sometimes clumsy and blundering. The cursed followers of Namira would not have been my first choice."

"Has it been you, from the beginning?" Nadene stroked Gelebor's cheek. "It took me so long to notice the signs."

"Your ignorant destruction of the Heart left only a trace of divine power here." Dagoth Ur walked to the edge of the cliff. His mask turned towards the lava pools below. "I could not recorperalize in

physical form. For two hundred years I slumbered, existing only as a soul floating on winds of flame. As Vvardenfell remained lifeless, so did I. Only recently did circumstances change. Dunmer began to return. To the city called Balmora, a loyal dreamer of old began to whisper in the darkness of his cellar. He knelt before an ash statue and murdered small creatures in the name of the Sixth House. Small, pitiful souls, scarcely enough to rouse me from my slumber. Then Aymdil sent me a mortal soul, murdered with a Heart Stone, and I began stirring at last."

On the other side of the altar, Aymdil bowed his head.

"His worship granted me enough strength to send a single message across Tamriel. The Tribe Unmourned lies in ashes, thanks to your misguided crusade. Though it brought me no small amount of shame to do so, I was forced to speak under another's name. To wear the face of our enemy."

"You sent the prophecy to Eola," Nadene said. "Fine. I suppose that makes sense. But why bring Gelebor into this?"

"I foresaw that you would grow close to this child of Akatosh. I knew I would have to push you to your limits, to ensure your return to Red Mountain. Beyond that, the n'wah I controlled needed a purpose. You have seen first-hand what destruction they wrought, without a firm hand to guide them. The slaughter of so many Dunmer on the southern coast...that was truly a waste. None of these mer will now taste of the divine power."

Her hands tightened into fists. "All of this, so many lives lost, just to bring Gelebor and I to this place? Have you ever heard of a fucking courier, Voryn?"

Nadene had hoped it would put the monster off balance, referring to him as his mortal name, but Dagoth Ur merely chuckled. "You make me laugh, Nerevar. I faced you alone in battle the first time, believing you to be an honorable opponent. Of course you would have arrived here with an army of Redoran or Telvanni, if you had known it was I who desired a meeting. Perhaps they would have been able to defeat me. You will not prevail. To this place where destiny is made, you have come unprepared. A wise reincarnation would not have dared step foot on Vvardenfell without Kagrenac's tools. They remain on Solstheim?"

"Like I would ever tell you." Keening, Sunder, and Wraithguard were now secure in a pocket dimension, if Neloth had delivered her message to Divayth in time. "I destroyed Lorkhan's Heart. That was supposed to be the end of it."

"And so it would have been, were it not for the Heart Stones I had the n'wah collect. They hold only a shadow of divine essence. Akulakhan will never live again as he does in my dreams. The winds of blight have fallen forever silent. Nevertheless, these shards of power will be enough to shape destiny. Morrowind has been made weak under your watch. The Dunmer people have been degraded. This land will be simple to conquer, and by the time it is led to glory all will praise the name of Dagoth. The Sixth House will be restored, and the essence of the divine will gild the hills of Resdaynia. In one day or a thousand, I will share my dream with all Dunmer. Then we shall ponder ambitions of empire."

Some of his words struck true. Nadene felt her anger rising. "I did all that I could! How was I supposed to know what would happen, years or decades in the future?"

"Such was the price of your shortsightedness." The mask turned towards her. "You freed the Heart and struck me down. You did not weep for me, as I did for you. In perhaps your wisest act, you also felled the false Tribunal that betrayed us both in turn. Then came your gravest mistake. You scourged Morrowind of living gods, and left nothing in their place. The Dunmer required a

formidable leader to guide them to victory. You shirked this burden. Morrowind has paid the blood toll for your ignorance."

"Nothing good would have come of me taking Lorkhan's power." Nadene had been having this conversation with herself for centuries. It felt cathartic, almost, to speak to Dagoth Ur again. *If this will be my last conversation, at least it's an interesting one.* "I saw what taking part in the divine did to Vivec, Sotha Sil, and Almalexia. And to you most of all, Voryn. You were a proud and loyal Dunmer, once. Now you're just a withered wraith."

Dagoth Ur shook his head, evidently disappointed. "I see you have learned nothing since our last encounter. Together, we could have stopped Baar Dau's fall and averted disaster. The mongrel dogs of the Empire abandoned Morrowind in times of trouble, just as I foresaw. The Septims were a formidable enemy. Now they are gone, and the rotting carcass of Cyrodiil threatens to pull our land down with them under the dirt. Can you truly say now that my plans would have been worse for Morrowind? Bloodshed and war were a foregone conclusion, but under the Sixth House's rule we would have emerged stronger than ever before. You chose the path of the righteous prey. Do you truly believe those that burned away in the year of fire would have thanked you for the pleasure? Thousands and thousands of Dunmer have perished for nought. Our civilization has descended to the level of an impotent lover, discarded by the Empire you placed so much faith in. For shame, Nerevar. For shame"

She'd forgotten how much Dagoth Ur liked to talk. Before their first battle, when she had arrived with the tools of Kagrenac, they had spoken for nearly an hour in the cavern outside the Heart Chamber. *At least this time around, it's serving a purpose.* Nadene could only pray that Habi and the others had reached the surface by now.

"None of this matters. What's already happened can't be changed, not even by you." Nadene left his side to go back to the altar. Gelebor was stirring. *Would it be better, if he had stayed unconscious?* A selfish part of her was glad she'd be able to hear his voice again.

"Gelebor? Can you hear me?"

They had almost reached the entrance when the cannibal stepped into their path, a sword in his hands.

"Banning," Habi spat the name like a curse. "It's over. Eola's dead."

Kharjo had not recognized the man at first. Then it dawned on him, in a rush of painful memory. This was one of those who had consumed his family in the name of Namira. Eola's life was taken from his reach, but he could still deal with this aberration of nature.

He unsheathed his blade, and Renji's words burst into his mind.

PAPA!

He gasped, nearly dropping the sword.

Banning stepped into the light, two furry bundles under his free arm.

"I don't know what in Oblivion is goin' on," Banning growled. "But I ain't dying on this greyskin island. Take me with you, or these little cats are dead."

Papa! Help us! The sound of his son's voice in his head was like a heavy spirit to Kharjo. How many nights had he stared up at unfamiliar ceilings, longing for the sound of his children? There

was Jo'ahni, too, now. Not yet old enough to form words, but filling his head with a feeling of terror. And this cannibal, stinking of dogs, dared to threaten his kittens in front of him?

This would not do.

"Habi, go ahead with the others." Kharjo stepped aside to let them pass. "Khajiit will speak with this cultist. Perhaps we can work something out."

"You better hope so," Banning said.

"You sure?" Habi bit her lip. "You don't know this man. He's evil."

Khajiit knows better than anyone. "Do not worry about me. Just move along, and quickly."

Soon enough Kharjo and his children were alone in the passageway with Banning.

"So what'll it be?" Banning's arm tightened around the two small Alfiq, and Kharjo felt their fear rising. "You lead me to your way off of Vvardenfell, or I make myself a nice new pair of socks."

Kharjo closed his eyes and gently conferred with his son, calming the boy and issuing some simple commands. Then he raised his sword. *For Zaynabi.*

"Drop the blade, cat!"

"You failed to kill me, on the road outside Markarth. This was not a wise choice."

Renji bit down, Banning yelped, and Kharjo's sword flashed forward like a long claw. The blood of a man splattered on the volcanic rock. Kharjo clutched two children to his chest, caught just before they hit the ground. Tears dripped from his whiskers.

"My babies," he whispered. "My little kittens."

Renji and Jo'ahni rubbed against him, purring. Kharjo hurried down the passageway, eager to leave the citadel called Dagoth Ur behind.

"Nadene?" Gelebor spoke, his eyelids fluttering. His world was agony and flame. *Is this Oblivion? Perhaps the torture has already begun.* A short figure wearing an ordinator's mask stood over him. "Is that you?"

"I'm afraid it is. I love you, endling. I love you and I'm sorry. They...they took your hand. I wasn't fast enough to help."

What does she mean? His whole body ached, but he could feel both his arms, whole and healthy, resting on the ebony of the altar. Gelebor raised his hand to wipe the tear from her cheek...without success. The tear continued its path, despite his intentions, and dripped on to the volcanic rock below. His left arm ended just below the elbow, in a charred stump. Gelebor stared at it for a long moment. Then he let his head fall back on to the altar, utterly numb. There was a tall being wearing a golden mask standing nearby, as well as one of Eola's Dunmer followers.

Gelebor didn't ask what was going on. They seemed to be past such things.

"Kharjo and Habi are safe?" He asked, running his tongue over lips cracked and dry.

"Yes." Nadene squeezed his right hand, but Gelebor couldn't bring himself to look down at his body again.

"Good. That eases my mind." A thought occurred to him. "I've not been eaten. Did you kill Eola?"

"It wasn't me." She inclined her head towards the golden masked figure. Gelebor took a second look at the mer, his head clearing. He noticed now the horrific condition of the being's form, like a collection of skin and muscle stretched over too much bone. Eola's robes were barely distinguishable among the mass of gore that composed the figure's torso. "Meet Voryn Dagoth. We're old friends."

"Oh. I see." This was a welcome distraction from his missing limb, at least. "I would say it's a pleasure to meet you, Voryn, but Nadene has told me some disturbing stories."

"He was the one speaking into your head, visiting your dreams." Nadene smiled sadly. "It was never Azura at all."

So it was never Vyrthur, either. That gave Gelebor more relief than he could have ever imagined. *My brother loved me. He didn't want me to kill anyone.* Whether he was waiting with Auriel was another question. One that would be answered soon, from the looks of things.

"Why me? I have no great power or influence."

"Not as of now," Dagoth Ur agreed. "But you possess a noble spirit. Though I curse the false Tribunal for all eternity and with all my breath, they stumbled upon wisdom by accident. Only a foolish leader refuses to learn from his mistakes. By possessing the bulk of divine power for myself I made the Sixth House vulnerable. My Dagoth brothers were too weak to handle the true essence of the Heart. That is not the case with you, Nerevar, or this Falmer you have paired with. He is not so different from the Chimer we used to be, before Azura's foul curse. Together we will reap the power of the Heart Stones, and form a new Tribunal to lead Morrowind to triumph."

Gelebor exchanged a look with Nadene. "And what should befall us if we refuse this offer?"

The golden mask offered no hint of his emotions, but nevertheless Gelebor could sense Dagoth Ur's disappointment. "After all that has transpired to bring you here, you would spit in the face of destiny? The power of *gods* is within your reach! I have spent much time inside your head, lost child. Your forsaken deity is no less deserving of scorn than the Daedra who brought Morrowind to ruin. The fury of millenia runs through you. I called for you to purge this citadel of n'wah, but you refused the call. This is your chance to atone."

"I have no desire for divine power." Gelebor sat up, finally forcing himself to look down at his left arm again. "I just want to live in one place, surrounded by those I love and who love me in return. It's all I've ever wanted. A home."

Nadene sat down beside him, and rested her metal chin on his shoulder.

"Bah." Dagoth Ur turned away from them. "A being of so many years should know better than to believe such an ideal can exist without being won through prolonged war and hard-won victory. Suffering is a certainty."

"I know. I survived a conflict that ended long before your people ever came to this land. I'd rather die as who I am, as misguided and naïve as you believe me to be. Every being that has touched Lorkhan's Heart has committed atrocities with their divine power. I will not stain the legacy of the Snow Elves further by becoming a living god."

"Very well. I will reunite you with your lost race soon, and mourn the lost opportunity. What is your answer, Nerevar?"

Though he was sure of his own decision, Gelebor was curious what Nadene would say. No one on Nirn knew better than her the dangers and benefits of taking power from the Heart of Lorkhan. Perhaps that made her the most qualified to do so. *But then, it was the hubris of the Tribunal that made them believe they could handle the power without it corrupting them.*

Nadene stood, and walked over to face Dagoth Ur. She stood a few heads shorter than him, even with the ordinator mask.

She twisted the mask off, revealing the face he loved so dearly. Nadene dropped the helmet over the edge, and Moon-and-Star soon followed.

"Nerevar is dead," Nadene spoke. Gelebor's heart swelled with pride. "I don't know if you killed him or the Tribunal did. I don't care. You are a *monster*. You're arrogant, selfish, bigoted, murderous. Your plans have never been to help Morrowind and the Dunmer - you seek only to expand your own power. It makes my skin crawl to breathe the same air as you. I could spend days listing all the reasons I will never join your tribunal, but we really don't have that kind of time, and it's not going to matter anyway. My name is Nadene Othryn, I don't want any of your fucking Heart Stones, and in a few minutes everything on Vvardenfell is going to die."

Dagoth Ur grabbed her shoulders in his clawed hands. "What have you done? What doom has your lack of ambition brought on us, fool?"

"You remember Baar Dau?" Nadene grinned. "The rogue moon that Sheogorath shot at Morrowind, for no particular reason? I asked him to do it again."

Gelebor laughed, a warm and honest sound that echoed off the far cavern walls. He leapt up from the altar and pulled Nadene into a hug, pointedly ignoring the looming figure before them.

He said, "Gods, you're mad. I love you so much. Have you warned the coastal mainlanders to prepare?"

"If Neloth can be relied upon, my message should have reached all of Morrowind by now. I requested a smaller moon, and for all the trouble I went through, the God of Madness better deliver. How could he resist? The Nerevarine, asking him to blow up Vvardenfell. I bet he'll make a holiday out of it."

"The Daedra are not known for their generosity." Gelebor pulled back, studying her face. "What did you have to provide, in return?"

"In exchange for Neloth's help, I gave him the location of my hideaway on Solstheim. There are countless priceless artifacts and relics hidden there. To Divayth I left the Tools of Kagrenac. He's the only mer I can trust them with. To the Urshilaku Ashlanders I am leaving the deed to my tower and the lands surrounding it. My forest will be put to good use. It's the least I can do, for destroying their ancestral home. And..." Nadene took a deep breath. "To Sheogorath, I gave my soul."

He frowned. "Just yours?"

"I didn't want to speak for you, Gelebor. I know you want to see your brother again-"

"I'm coming with you."

"You really don't-"

He silenced her with a kiss, and the silence endured for a pleasantly long time. Dagoth Ur watched. Whatever machinations were occurring behind his golden mask, they were not privy to. His loyal

follower Aymdil glared at them, no doubt waiting for his master's command to attack.

"Insanity," Dagoth Ur finally spoke. "I just cast my focus to the heavens. The madness you spoke is true. You would obliterate Morrowind, rather than leave it in the care of your oldest and most faithful friend?"

"I'm not your friend. And I'm just obliterating Vvardenfell. I did tell the Dunmer not to return here. Maybe next time, they'll listen."

"You have deceived me. I sense Namira's cultists have been taken from the island. Is your fear so overwhelming that you dare not face me in battle? The fates are cruel. In all my designs, I never accounted for cowardice on your part. Nerevar Indoril was never one to turn away from his duty."

"Maybe I'd win, the first few times. I'm quick with my bow, and powerful with magic. But eventually I'd slip up. Not to mention, I have no idea how many Heart Stones are hidden in this citadel. I don't know what Nerevar would've done, but I'm not leaving anything to chance. Everything here is going to be vaporized. Which means, Gelebor and I aren't going to just let you leave this chamber. So I'm guessing this is the part where you kill us."

"A pity. We could have built an empire to withstand the tides of time and fate, Nerevar. An enlightened society, bathed in the divine, without fear of the ancient gods." Dagoth Ur's hands crackled with energy. The heat inside the room was rising, impossibly. "So be it. Others will come. Perhaps your next reincarnation will prove more open-minded."

Out of nowhere, a rush of movement. A shadow fell on Dagoth Ur from behind, stabbing again and again with a dwarven dagger. The Sharmat cried out, his gathered energy dissipating like smothered kindling.

"My lord!" Aymdil rushed at the shadow, slashing with his own blade.

An unspoken strategy formed between Gelebor and Nadene. They stepped past the dying god to grab Aymdil while he was distracted. By the time he had focused his attention on the new threats to either side of him, it was too late. They tossed him over the cliff like a sack of ash yams.

Aymdil screamed all the way down.

It was no easy feat, hoisting a grown mer with only one good hand. Gelebor leaned against the altar, breathing heavily. "Who is it?"

Nadene was crouched by the shadow. "I'm not sure."

"Eola," the charred woman gurgled. "My love...we are free." She took one final, rattling breath.

"Felled by an n'wah," Dagoth Ur spoke, his voice weak and thready. "The gods humiliate me for standing against them. How cruel that my final words shall be shared with the woman who has doomed Morrowind. The end arrives again, but the taste is no less bitter. I am coming, my general."

And then Gelebor and Nadene were alone in the chamber. He began to register a low rumble, that began near the edge of his hearing but was gradually increasing in intensity.

"He'll be back," Nadene said quietly. "With the Heart Stones spread all around this citadel, and all the blood spilled here, he'll be strong enough now to recorporealize. But it won't be in time to escape Red Mountain."

"Good." Gelebor patted the space beside him. "Come sit with me, love."

She cuddled up beside him, and he wrapped his good arm around her shoulders.

"This world is a strange one, isn't it?" Gelebor relished the feel of her heartbeat. "The Dunmer didn't even exist, for a good part of my life. Now I'm going to die for them." The rumbling was growing to a roar.

"I've done it before, according to prophecy." Nadene glanced at the ruined corpses before them. "There are worse things to die for." Pebbles and ash rained from the ceiling. Gelebor's ears popped.

"That there are." *My friends are safe, my brother loves me, I did not fall to the path of darkness, and I'm in the arms of Nadene Othryn. If this is why Auriel kept me alive, then I accept his choice. I die for the Dunmer.*

"Still," Nadene went on. "I don't really want to. Do you?"

"Hmm. On the whole, not particularly." He winced as a sharp rock hit his face. "I've discovered many things I'd like to live to do and see."

"Do you remember what I said about Bal Isra, a while ago?"

Her estate in the western Vvardenfell Ashlands. "Vaguely. Something about a Recall marker in your bedroom, buried under a mountain of rock?"

Nadene had to shout to make herself heard. "Only possibly buried. As opposed to the definitely buried that we're about to be."

"Let's do it," he yelled back. A boulder smashed on the ground nearby, sending them both flying. A plethora of ash filled the Heart Chamber, and lava seeped from the cracks in the rock. *A vision of Oblivion.*

Gelebor heard Nadene screaming his name. His eyes were stinging. *Is this how it ends? Both of us alone, stumbling around in the darkness?*

"Brother!" A child's voice called out. Gelebor's eyes widened. Vyrthur, all of twelve years old, grabbed him by his remaining hand and pulled him through the ash. "This way."

He didn't have time to ask any questions before Nadene was in his arms, wonderfully intact.

By the time Gelebor had regained his senses, the child had vanished. The world was shaking, and the sound of a thousand maelstroms filled the Heart Chamber. Gelebor and Nadene clung to each other. Her magicka was gathering.

"Now, Nadene!"

Warmth enveloped him.

The Happy Hours

"Man is mortal, and doomed to death and failure and loss.

This lies beyond our comprehension - why do you not despair?"

- Spirit of the Daedra

Under a choking layer of gray, the city of Blacklight endured. Children traced their fingers through the ash on colored windows, making shapes to amuse themselves. Stall keepers on street corners cursed the sky and dusted off their wares for the tenth time this morning.

Customers appeared from the mist like ancestor ghosts, pulling down their masks to offer greetings. A trio of harassed-looking mages from the Telvanni enclave slowly worked their way down the manor district, collecting mounds of ash with their telekinesis. Their escort of Redoran Guard followed along, evidently helping in some way.

Blacklight struggled, but Blacklight survived. And if Dunmer were surviving here, the rest of the province might just prevail. She may have stunned Morrowind, but she had not destroyed it. *I did what I had to. I'd do it again.*

"The Grand Council will see you now, sera," said the Oathman behind her, not unkindly. "But if you're waiting for someone to arrive, I can probably stall the councilors for a while."

"No thanks. I'm fine to go in alone." Nadene absently scratched the back of her head, where the strap of the new eyepatch went through her hair. Her glass armor was lying in some discount armorer's smelting bin; after the trials of Red Mountain and Bal Isra, the pieces had been damaged beyond repair. Nadene wore a simple tunic and trouser, and a short cloak adapted to the warmth in the colors of House Redoran. She followed the Oathman down the passageway.

The Grand Council had granted her a half-day reprieve before this audience, but Nadene had no illusions about what would transpire if she tried to leave the city. The Redoran Guard had escorted her to the Rootspire almost as soon as the *Ald'ruhn* had docked, and Nadene had not been out of their sight since. *I am a prisoner, in all but name.* She was finding it to be a far more comfortable title than "Nerevarine."

The reprieve had been for the Grand Council's benefit more likely than not, so they would have time to hear the story Nadene had told the captain of the *Ald'ruhn* and collect the other relevant facts streaming in from all over Morrowind. Though she doubted Divayth Fyr or Neloth would be showing up to provide their points of view. *Especially if the Council made the mistake of ordering their presence. They'd both ignore the message out of spite.*

The Rootspire was unusual in how it differed from typical Redoran constructions. The base of the towering structure was an ancient tree, and artificial additions surrounded the trunk in a manner not unlike that of a Telvanni mushroom tower. Nadene hadn't visited Blacklight for over two hundred years, but this place at least had remained much the same. The Rootspire had been around for centuries, if not millenia, born of a time before the words Redoran and Telvanni had any meaning.

"Here you are," the Oathman said. They stood before a remarkably nondescript door, covered in Daedric letters. *The Chambers of the Grand Council.* "Please enter whenever you're ready."

Well, better get this over with. "Thanks. Have a safe trip down."

Nadene entered the chambers without fanfare. The air smelled of floral incense and kreshweed smoke. She walked to the circular dais in the center of the room, where petitioners to the Grand Council and visiting nobles stood to speak with the five representatives of Morrowind's Great Houses. Nadene looked up and quickly sized up the attending councilors.

Redoran, Telvanni, Indoril, Dres, and Sadras. The only councilor she might have known was from the first House, and the chair on the apex platform stood empty. Nadene knew the next three by reputation and her dealings on Vvardenfell, though she had little idea how the Houses might have evolved in the last decades. Of House Sadras, she knew nothing at all, save that they had taken Hlaalu's position on the Grand Council some time ago.

"This is not proper," spoke the councilor on the House Indoril platform. He was an old, slightly round Dunmer with a bushy beard of black and gray. "Savvu, help me speak reason to Councilor Dremir. We can *not* begin without a representative of House Redoran present."

"If we do not begin soon," growled the mer on the Dres platform. Scars and colored markings covered every inch of his exposed skin. "We shan't begin at all. Savvu can hold his tongue. As can you, Ornsuil. Nerevar was an Indoril. This Othryn woman is a Redoran. If we were to do things *properly*, neither of your Houses would be present for this trial. You are clearly conflicted."

The Telvanni councilor, Savvu, sat between them. He looked from one to the other with an expression of absolute apathy.

"If beginning without the Redoran gets me out of here quicker," he said, "Then I am in favor."

"Blasphemy! To hold a trial of this magnitude, in the Rootspire, in *Blacklight*, without the leader of the Grand Council...this is unthinkable. Surely we can find a substitute representative."

Dremir scowled. "None of sufficient rank would arrive in time. As designated Justiciar of Laws, the decision is mine. Let us not forget that the Redoran councilor would be here, if he had not been forced to land his ship near Necrom and continue by guar."

The councilors hadn't taken notice of Nadene entering the chamber, and had been effectively ignoring her since. Now the Dres councilor glared down at her with a cold hatred. Dunmer had long lives, and with them came long grudges. The Nerevarine had been an enemy of House Dres for many long years, ever since she'd taken a hard stance against their slave trade. The practice had long since been outlawed in Morrowind, but the memories had not faded.

"Am I the only sane mer here?" Ornsuil shook his head sadly. He turned to the Sadras platform. "And you, Councilor Tolosi? Surely you cannot support this."

The House Sadras councilor had remained silent up until now. She was the only woman on the Grand Council; a pale, short Dunmer with long dark hair spilling over the shoulders of her simple robes.

Tolosi shrugged. "We are all trapped in Blacklight, dear Ornsuil, for at least another day. There is little else to do but talk. Let us see what the Nerevarine has to say, and then we will judge her. If she is unsatisfied with our verdict, she will be allowed to request a stay of justice until the Redoran councilor has arrived to vote."

Savvu glanced at his timepiece. "Compromise. Splendid. Let's get on with it, then."

All four councilors stared down at Nadene, now. It was difficult to keep all of them in focus with only one eye, so she chose to look at Tolosi and Ornsuil. They seemed to be the ones more likely

to side with her. *As if it's going to matter.*

"Your name is Nadene Othryn," Dremir began.

"Is that a question?"

"No." He frowned and looked down at a sheet of worn parchment. "Born in Cyrodiil. Transferred to Vvardenfell on the orders of Emperor Uriel Septim on the 427th year of the Third Era. An outlander, then. Hmm. You claim to be the Nerevarine, do you?"

"Not a claim." Nadene yawned. "A fact. I was never very happy about it either, pal."

"And you say in your report that Moon-and-Star, the only means of ascertaining your true identity, was destroyed during this supposed battle in the Sixth House citadel. How convenient."

Tolosi interrupted, "Her description does historically match that of the Nerevarine, Dremir."

Ornswil nodded emphatically. "Yes, yes! Just yesterday evening, I passed through a museum in the Arts District. There is a painting there of the Nerevarine. I tell you, Dremir, the figure depicted stands before us now!"

"Very well. Fine." Dremir's lip curled. "So you may be the Nerevarine. No matter. Your crimes remain the same. Over a day ago, a peculiar message began spreading like wildfire from Morrowind's coastal cities. An improbable warning of impending disaster, supposedly from the Nerevarine herself. It is a testament to how fearful the Dunmer have become that so many took this warning to heart so quickly. Ships soared back to their ports. Trade and travel were suspended, and cities pulled citizens behind their walls. And then it happened. The impossible, and the unforgivable. A rogue moon struck the top of Red Mountain. A moon that *you* summoned!"

"Yup. That was me."

The straightforward admission brought gasps from Ornswil and Tolosi, and even Savvo leaned forward in interest.

Dremir smiled darkly. "So you admit it. You asked Sheogorath to send this rock to strike Morrowind?"

"It was the only sure way of defeating Dagoth Ur." Nadene swallowed. "His plans would have led to Morrowind's ruin. I couldn't let him begin the work of the Sixth House anew."

Ornswil sat back heavily in his chair. "I can scarcely believe my ears. The reincarnation of Indoril Nerevar, consorting with one of the Troubles...by Azura. Maybe Dremir is right."

"Let me remind my fellow councilors," Dremir spoke, "forgetful as they are, that no evidence has been presented to support the ludicrous claim that Dagoth Ur was resurrected again at Red Mountain."

Nadene scoffed. "What sort of evidence do you imagine survived the impact? Everything related to his return was necessarily destroyed. As were Balmora and the Telvanni estates."

"And whose fault is that? Perhaps you should have put more thought into your escape plan before you attacked Morrowind, fetcher."

Tolosi cleared her throat. "Enough bickering, please. I've spoken to the Ashlanders and refugees from Balmora that were teleported on to the Blacklight docks. They were questioned separately,

but all of their stories match up. I am inclined to believe Serjo Othryn. Who would know better if the Sharmat returned?"

Savvo added, "Our spellwrights *did* find signs of arcane coercion."

Ornswil fanned himself. "Boethiah take me. The Sharmat? Dagoth Ur, truly? I shudder to even imagine it."

"Silence, all of you!" Dremir pointed at Nadene. "I am not concerned with this woman's identity. Nor do I care about the motives behind her actions. I am Justiciar of Laws, and here I see a Dunmer who has confessed to calling down the chaos of Oblivion on to Morrowind. The ash storms alone caused by the impact will harm our trade and crop yields for months to come, if not years. Not to mention that she has rendered Vvardenfell lifeless once again. House Dres calls for justice. Nadene Othryn must be put to death!"

A long silence followed his declaration. The other councilors exchanged uneasy glances.

"By the gods!" Ornswil swayed in distress. "The Temple suffered enough damage when it came to light that the false Tribunal murdered Indoril Nerevar. Years of soul-searching and reformation. Now you want us to execute the Lord Captain's reincarnation? She is Azura's chosen, ring or no ring! The Reclamations will not smile on this course of action."

Savvo sighed. "Not to mention, official executions take weeks to plan, and we all must be present to witness. I'm returning to Port Telvannis as soon as the ash clears."

Tolosi merely watched, offering no immediate comment. Her eyes flickered towards the petitioner's dias, towards Nadene.

"Bah." Dremir was seething. "You weak-willed kwama grubs. We all know you are here as a punishment from your House, Councilor Savvo, but that doesn't give you the right not to participate in the process. And you, Ornswill, you overgrown sycophant...if the Redoran were here, I've no doubt you would be down on your knees kissing their chitin boots. At least it's common knowledge that the Telvanni have no interest in cooperation. House Indoril was once a pillar of Morrowind's strength. How *far* you have fallen."

Tolosi raised her small hand, calling for silence. "Please, serjos. The Nerevarine deserves swift justice, I agree. But perhaps execution is a step too far. For one, we can't be certain Nerevar won't simply reincarnate again. What kind of punishment would that be? We know this woman Nadene Othryn is the true and present reincarnate. Whether her destructive actions were meant to save Morrowind is not for us to determine. Let history judge her in that respect. As far as the Grand Council's ruling is concerned...I have an alternative punishment in mind."

House Sadras requests that the Nerevarine, Nadene Othryn, be immediately exiled from Morrowind and all of its territories. Tell me, Savvo. What was that number your spellwrights gave us, concerning when Vvardenfell will once more be fit for Dunmer habitation?"

Savvo yawned. "Approximately one thousand years."

"A suitable length of time, I think, for someone who is rumored to be immortal. What say you, Dremir?"

"A thousand year exile..." Dremir's brow furrowed. "Perhaps. But only if we agree that should the Nerevarine appear in Morrowind before that time has elapsed, she will be executed on sight."

"Very well. Then we shall have a vote, as soon as the Redoran councilor has arrived in Blacklight."

Nadene shook her head. "No need. I'll accept any ruling from the present members of the Grand Council."

Ornswil's eyes widened. "Are you sure? House Redoran is one of your greatest allies here, Nerevarine."

Gods, am I tired of hearing that word.

"The girl has spoken," Dremir growled. "All in favor of Nadene Othryn's immediate and total exile from Morrowind and all of its territories, for a period of no less than one thousand years, upon punishment of death should she dare to return before that time."

Three hands went up. Only Ornswil kept his arm down, looking glumly towards the closed door of the chamber.

Tolosi nodded primly. "The Grand Council of Morrowind has rendered its decision, in the sight of mortals and those who are not our ancestors. It is presently the 8th of Sun's Dusk. You will have the remainder of the year to put your affairs in order and make your departure from Morrowind. On the first of Morning Star, your exile status will be made public knowledge and every guard and soldier from here to Narsis will know your face."

"Very well." Nadene bowed her head. "I thank the Grand Council for its merciful judgement." *I'll be happy never to see any of these fetchers again.*

Nadene left the chamber and was halfway down the passageway when a familiar face entered view. First Councilor Lleril Morvayn looked a wreck. His clothes were drenched in sweat, and even as he stood before her he leaned against the wall to support himself.

"Neverarine," he said between breaths. "Please tell me I'm not too late. Neloth's message only arrived a few hours ago, and travelling through the ash with your guards took-"

"It's fine, Morvayn." Nadene offered him the waterskin from her waist. "I'm just being exiled. For a thousand years."

He nearly spat out the water. "Exiled? A whole millenia...you've done more for Morrowind than any living Dunmer! This is outrageous. Don't move. I'm going to march in there and set them straight."

"No. *No*. I don't want you to get yourself in trouble over me." Nadene put a gentle hand on his shoulder. She sensed if she breathed too hard on the poor mer, he'd fall to the ground. "I was planning on leaving, anyway. Promise me you won't interfere?"

"I...I don't understand." Morvayn slid down to the floor, his eyes glazed over.

"Don't worry. You'll probably regain a fair bit of your sanity, not having to deal with me anymore." Nadene sat down beside him.

"Where will you go?"

Nadene shrugged. She actually had a pretty good idea, but she didn't want her general whereabouts following her exile to become common knowledge. No doubt there would be some fools trying to find her; bounty hunters, eager to trick the Grand Council and claim rewards, or even fans and well-wishers. *I just want to be left alone.*

"Morrowind without the Nerevarine..." Morvayn rubbed his face. "Madness. It was that old crow

Dremir that decided this, wasn't it?"

"Actually, he wanted me executed. Listen to me, Morvayn. I'm going to need you to help the Ashlanders and Balmorans I rescued from Vvardenfell. I'm giving the former my lands out in Hirstaag Forest. Could you help them get settled? As well as allow the Balmorans to integrate into Raven Rock? I'm sure many of them have kin in the city already. If you need additional gold, there's a fair amount of gold under my house in Firemoth Plaza."

Morvayn nodded numbly.

"Speaking of that house...tell Geldis Sadri it belongs to him. That mer has been sleeping in that tiny room in the Netch for too many years now. The deed is in my bedroom, and the code is 3333."

"I'll...make certain he knows. Are you sure about all this?"

Nadene rose, and offered her hand. "More sure than I've been in two hundred years, Lleril. My time in Morrowind has come to an end." She pulled him to his feet.

"Very well." Morvayn smiled sadly. "I can't help but say that Solstheim will seem much less whole without you around. Believe it or not, your presence in our woods brought my mind a great deal of peace."

"The years I spent on your island were not...totally awful. You've done good work, for the Dunmer. Try to keep it up. You left my guar outside the Rootspire?"

"Yes. Um...goodbye, Nerevarine. Be safe in your travels."

"Have a nice voyage back to Raven Rock." Nadene turned to leave. "And I never told you - my name is Nadene, councilor. Nadene Othryn."

"They're very happy to see us," Gelebor informed her, seconds before the guar's tongue resumed its assault on his face.

"You don't say," Nadene replied, and laughed as Alma jumped between them like an ash hopper. "I never thought I'd see them again." *Is it tears on my face, or guar saliva? Does it matter?*

Gelebor bent down to slip the rope around Ur's neck. A task easier said than done, particularly when you had only one hand to work with. "Everything went as planned, I assume."

"Yup. Exiled for a thousand years."

He nodded appreciatively. "They must have really enjoyed staring at the top of that damn mountain."

"Well, I might have done more damage than that." Nadene's eye fell to Gelebor's wrapped stump. "Let's not linger on the thought. I'm ready to leave this cursed country behind."

He nodded, looking away.

"Hey." She put a hand on his shoulder. "The vision of the island Falmer that bastard put in your head...you know they were never real, don't you?"

"Yes. I think some part of me always knew." Gelebor grimaced. "Better that they never existed, and so are spared the false fate Dagoth Ur spun for them. Chasing that dream almost made me lose myself. I'm the last Snow Elf. Most likely, I always will be. I've come to terms with that, now. Oh,

here." Gelebor handed her a small package. "The maid said this arrived a few days ago, addressed to you."

The markings on the front were in Divayth Fyr's elegant scrawl. Nadene had a feeling she knew what the letter in her hands said, but she opened it just to be sure. She read it several times before slipping it into her cloak.

"Anything interesting?" Gelebor asked, his brow raised.

"We've been invited to be the first residents of the new Tel Fyr. Divayth and his family have already begun living there. He's started cultivating spores for us." Azura's words rang through her head: *your tower will rise again.*

"Wonderful." Gelebor grinned broadly. "I can't wait."

Some of Nadene's old doubts rose to the surface. "You really mean that? I mean, I won't blame you if you'd rather return to Skyrim-"

He drew her into a kiss, silencing her protests. *I really have to stop letting that work on me.*

They led the guards out of the Rootspire, the shadow of the tower covering them in darkness. The ash in the sky was already clearing up. Thankfully the weather was still poor enough to keep most Dunmer inside, so they were not accosted as they fastened the small carriage on to the guards and loaded up their supplies.

Nadene drove them down the long streets of Blacklight. The city was a wonder, even seen through an ashy miasma: a delightful mixture of Redoran, Velothi, and even Imperial influences that pleased the eyes and stimulated the senses. Swaying bugshell lanterns passed by their heads, decorated with designs whose meanings had been lost to time. A hundred different scents of kreshweed filled the air as they passed a smoke shop, dizzying Nadene for a moment. The Telvanni enclaves were miraculous little islands of clarity in the sea of ash; the wizards' enchantments scrubbed the street and air around their dwellings. Nadene did her best to commit every sight to memory.

"Look at the stuff." She nudged Gelebor with her shoulder. He had started dozing off almost immediately. "Come on, this is your last chance."

He mumbled something unintelligible and rested his head on her arm. *Oh, well. You never really got comfortable in Morrowind, did you?* Another reason Nadene was happy to leave it behind.

They reached the port, and found it mostly deserted. The Inner Sea had still not been declared fit for travel, and there wasn't much reason to remain on the docks if no ships were allowed to leave them. That made it relatively simple to find the Khajiit waiting for the carriage's arrival.

"Wake up, Knight-Paladin," Kharjo called out. "You would not want to sleep through your grand adventure." His kittens slept against his chest, in a kreshfibre sling.

Gelebor stirred and stumbled off the carriage. Nadene followed him.

"Sure you won't come with us to Black Marsh?" Nadene asked. "Divayth is offering you a position as captain of his guard. You'd get your own residence tower, of course."

"Khajiit is sadly certain. Lord Fyr is kind to offer, but Renji and Jo'ahni need to walk the sands of Elsweyr. It is what my love would have wanted for them."

Gelebor frowned. "I fear for you, my friend. The Dominion have dug their claws deep into that land. Do you truly think it's safe to return?"

"I will not let the threat of the Thalmor guide my path." Kharjo stroked Renji's head. "Besides, we have survived a cult of Namira and the return of Dagoth Ur. It is difficult to be afraid of uptight Altmer, after what happened on Vvardenfell."

Nadene snorted. "True enough. Still, though. Do you promise to come to us in Black Marsh, if the Dominion comes for your family? I know you won't be able to keep your head down if you see injustice happening. You're a stubborn old cat."

"If Khajiit is forced to flee," Kharjo replied, "he will keep in mind his elven friends."

"I guess I'll have to be satisfied with that. I'm going to miss you, Kharjo. Be careful on your journey. It's a long way to Elsweyr from Blacklight. Spend your gold wisely!" Nadene had imparted to Kharjo most of her worldly fortune, after making a clandestine visit to one of the city's many banks. She had little doubt the Khajiit would have refused the sum, had she offered it plainly instead of privately transferring. *It's the least I can do. Without him, we'd all have died somewhere along the way.*

Kharjo hugged Gelebor and Nadene once more, and then turned away. He walked to a lone figure at the end of the docks, and appeared to speak for a minute or two. The figure bent its head down close to the kittens in their sling. Then Kharjo bowed his head and made his exit.

"Do you think she's alright?" Gelebor asked, his forehead creased in worry. "That's probably a stupid question, actually."

"Let me talk to her," Nadene said. "Double-check the carriage. Make sure we have enough to make it to Kragenmoor, at least."

She left Gelebor and quietly approached the lone figure.

"Habi?"

Habisinulu turned. Her face was mostly hidden by her cloak, but the healing bruises and cuts were still visible in the gloomy light of the morning. They had festered too long without restoration magic; now, they would have to heal naturally, and painfully, over the course of days or weeks.

"Yeah?" Habi's voice was lifeless. "What do you want?"

"I've asked First Councilor Morvayn to help settle the remaining Ashlanders at a new village on Solstheim," Nadene said carefully.

Habi turned back towards the sea. "Okay."

"Will you...be going with them?"

Habi stiffened. "I don't even know any of those mer. We couldn't *be* more different."

"You used to tell me you dreamed of meeting other Ashlanders."

"I was a foolish little girl. To think I could become a Redoran Guard...so stupid. I wasn't strong enough...I should have fought them harder. I should have seen what Eola was." She sucked in a sharp breath, fighting to maintain her composure. "Grandmother. *Why didn't you tell me?*"

"I'm so sorry, Habi." Nadene's head fell. "It was the only way." *How many times will I repeat those words, in the decades and centuries to come?*

"You destroyed the only home I've ever known. But that's not the worst of it. You made me leave that citadel...you promised me you were coming out. *You promised!* Kharjo made me teleport away. You were planning on dying in that horrible place. You were going to leave me alone. You were going to *abandon* me! And then I find out you survived, and we're together again, and you ask if I'm going to go off with some strange group of Dunmer?" Habi's voice cracked. "If you don't want me around, just say it."

"No, no, no." Nadene pulled Habi closer. The two women were of height, but never before had Habi seemed more a child to her. "Of course you can come with us, Habi. Nothing would bring me greater happiness. I just didn't know if you were ready to leave Morrowind behind. You've never lived anywhere else."

"Vvardenfell is gone." Habi wiped her face. "Everything I see in this city just reminds me of what I've lost. Maybe Black Marsh will be the same. I don't know. I just...don't want to feel this way anymore."

"Okay," Nadene said soothingly. "I know how you feel. Look, Gelebor's got the carriage ready. Let me introduce you to my guar..."

Three elves and two guar journeyed down the western border of Morrowind, with no particular haste. The ash on the roads made for slow travel, even with the carriage, and many days remained until the Grand Council's ruling came into effect. They rode past Cormaris but spent the night in Selethis, enjoying a hearty meal provided by the city council in honor of the Nerevarine's visit. Gelebor seemed to enjoy the indulgence, but Habi smiled little and scarcely touched food. Nadene watched her closely, worrying and thinking.

A month had passed before they reached Kragenmoor. This brought them worryingly close to the Grand Council's deadline, but Nadene didn't let it bother her. She led the carriage past the entrance to the city. Kragenmoor was a House Dres settlement to its roots; even without the threat of execution nearing, Nadene would not have let them spend the night there. Habi seemed relieved, in any case. She had seemed to improve during their days living on the road, out of sight of other Dunmer, with just Gelebor and the guar to keep them company. *A pleasant sign for our future at Tel Fyr.*

It was the 31st of Evening Star when they finally rolled into the border city of Narsis. The last day of the year, the day of the Old Life Festival, and the eve of the Nerevarine's one thousand year exile. They left the guar in the care of a well-tipped stablemaster and made their way down the street. This city had reportedly dwindled in wealth since House Hlaalu's downfall and the Empire's withdrawal, but there was little sign of that from the bands of Dunmer merrily streaming from tavern to tavern and the cheerful music filling the air.

"Free ale on Old Life Day," Nadene said. "Shall we?"

The tavern was smokey and near filled to the brim, but they found a small table in the corner and bought a large jar of sujamma.

"To our last night in Morrowind." Nadene raised her cup. "Let it be a happy one."

They drained their cups. Gelebor's eyes brightened, and even Habi perked up a little.

"It's a fucking miracle I survived this place," Nadene said. She had discreetly cast a spell to muffle the roar of the other patrons. "From that first step on to the Seyda Neen docks, I thought I was a goner."

"I'm glad you were wrong." Gelebor poured himself more sujamma. "My life would have turned out far duller, had I never come to work for you."

"You might still have your left arm beneath the elbow," Nadene pointed out glumly.

He balanced his cup at the end of the stump and gracefully brought it to his lips. "A small price to pay, some would say. I'm happy to be where I am."

"Always so composed. Every movement so...deliberate. From the moment I met you."

Habi cleared her throat. "I'm gonna go get another drink."

"You sure?" Nadene's eye followed her. "You don't have to leave."

"No, it's okay." Habi smiled. "I'm okay. You two have fun."

They followed her advice. The light coming through the tavern windows dwindled, and the jars of sujamma collected in the center of the table as the night marched onward. Gelebor ordered a basket of roasted nuts and amused Nadene by tossing them in the air and catching them in his mouth. She laughed much too loudly.

"I'm not completely certain," Gelebor said, sometime later. "But I'm pretty sure midnight has passed. You're officially breaking the law by remaining in this city, Nadene Othryn."

"I entered this blighted province as a criminal. Might as well leave it as one." Nadene traced the rim of her cup with one finger. "Are you going to turn me in, Knight-Paladin?"

"My sense of justice demands it." Gelebor leaned forward, his eyes cool and focused. "You'd better come with me, miss Othryn."

"Mmm. Tell me again, in Falmeris."

Gelebor paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Then he spoke: a strange series of sounds, exotic and beautiful. It sounded almost like a song to her. She replied with her own foreign tongue.

"What's that? Not Dunmeris. I'm nearly fluent, these days."

"Akaviri. I'll tell you about them, on the road." She reached for his hand.

Nadene tossed the barkeep a handful of coins, not looking where they landed, and sought out the nearest empty room. On the way she spotted Habi, laughing drunkenly with a few other young Dunmer. The sight gladdened her heart. She pushed Gelebor inside.

He gently took off Nadene's eyepatch and set it on the armoire, then ran his hand through her hair.

"I love you," Gelebor said.

"I love you too, endling," Nadene replied breathlessly. "Now show me."

Black Marsh was new for all of them. After they crossed the border, the first town they encountered was not overly different from Narsis, save that Argonians had taken the place of

Dunner. That was the last vestige of familiarity they encountered.

The physical road, already fading, was soon completely consumed by swampland. They hired the services of a river-rider to take them deeper into Black Marsh. The Argonian accepted their gold without a word and said nothing as they sped down the river. Nadene marvelled at the dense shoreline of trees, moss and other strange flora reaching down to brush the water's surface. Small fish jumped from the river, close enough almost to catch in your hands. Beams of sunlight peeked through the thick canopy above. Nadene glanced at Habi and Gelebor and found them in a similar state of wonder.

"No place on Vvardenfell was ever so alive," Habi breathed. "It's amazing. Is Tel Fyr going to be like this?"

"I suppose we'll have to see."

The rider dropped them off at the end of the river, at a small dock that none of the elves would have been able to distinguish from the shoreline around it. He gave them directions to a small village nearby, where his brother could be hired as a guide. *No doubt the only one in the area*, Nadene thought, thinking it was no coincidence that the river-rider had dropped them off here. But they needed a guide, anyway, and had enough gold. The golden-scaled Argonian they met in the village was named Haraz'k, and he already knew their destination.

"Tel Fyr, yes." Haraz'k counted their money, setting the coins apart with the tip of his claw. "I scouted the land for Divayth Fyr myself. Down near Blackrose. Long journey, from here - sure you want to go there?"

"Absolutely."

Thus followed three long weeks of trekking through wetlands and travelling down rivers. They became close with their guide, telling him of the long road that had taken them to Argonia, and the trials they had endured. Only seldom did they stay in settled places, for Haraz'k seemed to prefer the swamp. At certain points during the trip, he seemed to stop for minutes out of nowhere and shut his eyes.

"What are you listening for?" Habi asked one of the times, curious.

"The Hist speaks to those who care to open their minds." Haraz'k grinned toothily. "You too will learn to hear it, little elf, should you choose to spend your life in the swamps. I do not know how your kind can bear it, living in such dead lands. No one in Black Marsh dies alone, but the ash of Morrowind has no love save for the fire that created it. You are bright, young, full of potential. I think it is good you have come here."

Nadene agreed. By the time they'd reached Blackrose and said their farewells to Haraz'k, Habisinulu was almost seeming herself again. Nadene knew she would never be quite the same; none of them would ever forget the return to Red Mountain, as long as they lived. But it pleased Nadene to see that her granddaughter was learning to take her happiness where she could find it.

On the trail to Tel Fyr, Nadene found herself becoming almost as giddy as a child. Gelebor, walking beside her, took notice.

"Excited, are you?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Nadene took a deep breath of the wet swamp air. Gods, but it was so *alive*. "No one in hundreds of leagues knows my name or face. I've been telling myself that Nerevar is

dead since Red Mountain, but I'm only starting to believe it now. I can just be myself out here, Gelebor. Just Nadene Othryn, and the people she loves."

Tel Fyr materialized out of the swamplands, a flat clearing of significant size separated from the lakeshore only by a small thicket of trees. The wetland sentinels dwarfed the mushroom tower in the center, the tallest structure in Tel Fyr by far. Other mycelial constructions surrounded it, in various states of growth. A colorful garden covered the perimeter, filled with plants Nadene recognized from Morrowind. The native flora famously defied cultivation; a hurdle that even Divayth Fyr had not yet conquered.

"So this must be the famed Habisunulu!" The mer in question declared, standing up from his work in the soil. A wide gondolier's hat sat upon his head; the arms of his wizard's robes were torn off at the shoulders, and his feet were bare and covered in dirt.

"Yes, sir. I mean, pardon me, Lord Fyr." Habi looked positively awestruck.

"Some young blood will do us good, yes. Too many immortals in Tel Fyr now. Speaking of...we'll need to do something about that eye and arm, my friends. This presents us with a grand opportunity. There's a Dwemer ruin not too far from here. I haven't had the chance to explore it properly yet-"

"Settle down, Divayth!" Athtera appeared from the nearest mushroom, her scaly hands on her hips. "By the Hist, they've only just arrived after what I'm sure was a long journey. Let them take a breath before you go off installing mechanical limbs."

"Ah...you're right, of course." Divayth wiped the sweat from his brow. "Sometimes I forget mortal limitations. I've been counting the days until your arrival, Nadene. What wonderful things we'll do together here, so far from the Empire and the meddling Houses of Morrowind!"

"Good to see you too, Divayth." Nadene offered her arm. "Why don't you show us around?"

Divayth Fyr's eyes widened in excitement.

Hours spent happily, among good friends, went too quickly. Before Nadene knew it, she and Gelebor were settling into their new tower. It was nowhere near the size of her old Solstheim dwelling, but that just made it all the more cozy. Habi had accepted Divayth's offer of her own small tower nearby; he had some half-formed designs of training her to be Tel Fyr's chief guardsman.

Nadene was snuffing out the last lanterns of the night, Gelebor dozing off in the rocking chair beside her, when Divayth came up to their porch with a small bundle in his arms.

"Good evening," Divayth greeted them. "By most criteria, I'd imagine. I was just taking a little stroll. Yes, a little nightly sojourn."

"I see." Nadene exchanged a bemused look with Gelebor. It was unlike Divayth to beat around the comberry bush. "Anything we can get you, Divayth? You probably know this little house better than I do. Tell me where the spirits are, and we can share a nightcap."

"Ah...no thank you. A kind offer, but I came here with a purpose. This is difficult, for some unfathomable reason. It's not like anything I've ever had to do. That's a significant statement, for a mer of millenia."

"Speaking as one of those myself," Gelebor said, "Maybe you should start from the beginning."

"Hmm. The beginning. Always a troubling prospect. Well, I suppose this business began when I collected skin samples from you during your short residence in Tel Mithryn. For my own curiosity, more than any specific intent. Do not worry - the extraction process did no permanent damage."

"I'll...have to take your word on that."

"Have you come to apologize?" Nadene asked crossly.

"Not at all." Divayth uncovered the bundle in his arms, holding it up to the lantern light. "I came to offer you this."

A baby, perhaps only a week old, with skin as pale as milk. Small eyelids fluttered, and little white legs kicked in the air. When the infant opened its eyes, Nadene saw they were a striking shade of gold; a familiar color.

"You cloned him," she exclaimed. "By Azura, you crazy old mer. You created another Snow Elf!"

Gelebor just stared, his mouth slightly open.

"Not an exact clone. Identical individuals will prove troublesome if we're going to try to build a population. I was inspired by my successes with my own daughters, and I noticed how glum you were about this whole Falmer business, Gelebor, so I..." Divayth bit his lip, at an uncharacteristic loss for words. "If neither of you are ready for this, I'm sure I can find a home for her in the Argonian village."

"Her?" Gelebor said quietly. "It's a girl?"

Divayth nodded, ascending the porch steps. "Your daughter. A gift to you, for those wonderful tomes in Falmeris that you provided. To both of you, truly, for saving the world. I know no one else will thank you for it."

He gently passed the child over. Gelebor held it awkwardly at first, but Divayth showed him how to position his arm, and soon the Falmer child was cradled comfortably in Gelebor's lap.

"You have as long as you need to decide," Divayth said, stroking his beard. "I understand it is a difficult decision for some couples."

Nadene knelt down and kissed the baby's cheek. "I know my choice. Gelebor?"

"As far as rebuilding a population goes...I am not certain." He rested his hand on soft white curls, sighing softly. "But if you try to take this girl away from me now, Divayth Fyr, I'll be forced to attack you."

"Hah! I knew you'd like her. Gods, just think of it. Our children growing up together, here in Tel Fyr, free from the influence of the Empire and Morrowind. We can teach them magic, swimming, cooking, alchemy...the excitement threatens to overwhelm me."

"Let me get you some tea, before you collapse." Nadene took one last look at the baby, drinking in the sight, before turning to the door. "Want anything, love?"

Gelebor glanced up, still stroking the infant's hair. He smiled; turned away from Divayth, it was an expression just for his wife. "I'm fine, Nadene. I'm fine just where I am."

The End

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